



Joaquim da Silva

**Fontes, Significação e Estabilidade do Género no
Cinema *Noir* Americano**

**Sources, Signification and Genre Stability in
American *Film Noir***



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Tese apresentada à Universidade de Aveiro para cumprimento dos requisitos necessários à obtenção do grau de Doutor em Cultura, realizada sob a orientação científica do Prof. Dr. Anthony David Barker, Professor Associado do Departamento de Línguas e Culturas da Universidade de Aveiro

To Antonio, who made this possible.

O Júri

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This long journey of research will have proved invaluable all by itself by virtue of the hundreds of films that I have watched (nearly two hundred and some more than once), all of them listed alphabetically at the end in the Filmography section. Some three years of watching films several times a week, most of them from my home collection and dozens and dozens of others seen at film festivals held across major American cities, mainly those of San Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle.

The questions that I was frequently asked when I told people about this dissertation were how my interest in *film noir* appeared and what the term actually means. To them, I often replied that for years I have been ensnared by *noir* films and that I still recall the first time that I watched *Scarlet Street* (1945), directed by one of the most notable directors, Fritz Lang, and casting one of my favourite actors, Edward G. Robinson, in the role of Christopher Cross. Little did I know at that time that I was watching a seminal *noir* film, let alone that many years later I would be expressing my own point of view on this historical film type.

Many people and institutions have contributed so much to bring this project to fruition. I first offer my heartfelt thanks to my thesis advisor, Professor Anthony David Barker, for his thorough perception, his serenity, his interest, his sympathy and deep understanding of my work, and who patiently read and reread the manuscripts at various stages in an effort to infuse the whole with intellectual rigour. He has been accompanying my projects ever since my earliest postgraduate studies, namely during my Master's thesis, which he also supervised, and has willingly agreed to guide me throughout this present assignment.

The time that I lived in the United States (nearly three years) needed to carry out this research meant crossing paths with countless other *noir* aficionados. I am indebted to many people over the course of this sojourn abroad. I would like to begin by thanking Dr. Kurt Stone who taught me that this thesis "will become part of you: you eat with it, you sleep with it and you live with it". I attended some of his courses, specifically those that proved to be very noteworthy for this work: "The Early Hitchcock Films" and "Film *Noir*: Paint It Black", and another one intitled "International Cinema: Out of Focus", all administered at the FIU (Florida International University) in Miami. I benefited from lengthy and pleasurable conversations with him (which we still have via email) discussing scripts and other film-related issues. I also would like to express my thanks to the FIU for letting me use its library and other facilities on its superb and well-kept campuses.

I am also very grateful to the people who accepted my application to be part of the MIFF (Miami International Film Festival) for three consecutive years (2007-09). Working as a "guest relations" official enabled me to liaise the different film directors, actors and actresses and various producers who attended the Festival. March 2008 constituted a milestone moment for the MIFF as they celebrated their 25th anniversary. For a second time, they offered me the possibility to experience and see screened some of the distinguished directors' work featured during the last quarter century of the Festival's existence. During this event, I also had the opportunity to interview French director Luc Besson whose insight on film genre proved to be particularly significant for my work.

Whilst attending the "Noir City 5 Film *Noir* Festival" in San Francisco in January 2007 I truly had the chance to enter the immersive universe of *film noir*. Held at the magnificent Castro Theatre, this Festival meant for me the possibility of travelling down "those mean streets", lit intermittently by flashing neon lights, which soon gave way to the wonderful thought of meeting some of the obsessive heroes and heroines of *film noir* portrayed by actors and actresses like Edward G. Robinson, Richard Erdman, Evelyn Keyes and Joan Crawford.

A personal note of appreciation goes to Eddie Muller, the founder and president of the Film *Noir* Foundation (FNF) and author of various novels and *noir* books. Thanks to him, I became a member of the FNF and I sometimes write for the newspaper column, *Noir City Sentinel*. I had the chance there to become informed about various other Festivals, which also allowed me to meet in person Marsha Hunt (*Raw Deal*, 1948) and Richard Erdman (*Cry Danger*, 1951), and watch an array of hard-to-find *noirs* currently unavailable in any format. Undoubtedly San Francisco's rollercoaster topography and its eerie Golden Gate Park fog make it one of my favourite locations to slip into the *noir*

mood and certainly made me understand why the city appealed so much to *noir* filmmakers.

Another *noir* festival that followed a couple of months later was the one held by the American Cinematheque, with other *noir* film greats showing at both the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood and the Aero Theatre in Santa Monica. Attending this event meant a threefold adventure: a) I would again have a passage through dark back alleys with a collection of some delectable L.A.-based crime or detective dramas; b) I would get to have a key role in drawing up the promotional poster and website of the Festival: "Which city deserves the title 'Film Noir Capital City of the World?'; and c) I got the chance to be with many of the *noir* people I had met before, and have further conversations with them.

Again, during these three weeks I spent in Los Angeles for the Festival, I got to meet many of the actors and actresses who had performed in the films we watched. On the opening night, the films were preceded by a reception and a book-signing that was hosted by the authors and editor of the new anthology book, *Los Angeles Noir*. As with the previous festival, most of the days would have a Q&A moment between film screenings, which gave the viewers an excellent possibility to get to know the film's principals better and listen to their experiences concerning shooting their films, the roles they played and how they perceived films at that time. I was delighted to have had the opportunity to meet Kim Hamilton (who played Harry Belafonte's wife in *Odds against Tomorrow* (1959), giving her impressions of co-stars Shelley Winters, Robert Ryan and Gloria Grahame); Susan Harrison (she was Burt Lancaster's sister in *Sweet Smell of Success*, 1957); Lynne Carter from *The Port of New York* (1950), a rarely seen Eagle-Lyon film; Sherry Jackson (she was only eight years old when she played Garfield's daughter in *The Breaking Point* (1949)); Tommy Cook from *Cry of the City* (1948); Ann Robinson in *The Glass Wall* (1953); Coleen Gray who co-starred in Kubrick's *The Killing* (1956); Richard Anderson in *The People against O'Hara* (a 1951 MGM production); and the list goes on.

July of that year I flew to Seattle to participate in another *noir* Festival (the first one to be held in this city), which went on for a full week. The McGraw Hall of the Seattle Centre was also the venue where I met many new people and talked to some familiar faces again. The screen lit up with some rare film gems, making it a delight for the *film noir* lovers present.

The years that followed were also remarkably rich and valuable. I attended the *Noir City Film Noir Festival*, again at the Castro Theatre in San Francisco in January 2008, which gave me the pleasure of listening to *noir* actress Joan Leslie in-person, and watching some true *noir* masterpieces, many of them in brand newly restored 35mm prints, like *The Prowler* (1951). And, finally, in January 2010 I was able to participate in the last "Noir City 8 Film Noir Festival" in the same venue before submitting this thesis. This year not surprisingly saw another noteworthy event which showcased a full set of double-features and also included interviews and discussions. I look forward to supporting and actively participating in future *Noir City* events.

I have benefited greatly from the collections in the major libraries of the USA, namely the ones in cities where the *noir* Festivals took place but also the ones in Miami, as I mentioned earlier, and the New York Research Libraries, especially the Performing Arts library at Lincoln Centre Plaza, where I would spend hours browsing through their catalogues, manuscripts and archives. I am therefore most grateful to all of them for being so supportive in answering all my questions and providing me the materials that have given me the chance to make an original contribution in this dissertation.

My appreciation and my gratefulness are also due to the University of Aveiro for having accepted my candidature for this project and the Portuguese Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for giving me a short-term grant to proceed with my studies abroad and for that reason letting me embark into this *noir* adventure.

I am most sincerely indebted to all those who offered valuable suggestions and assiduous support (at all levels) to make sure that this work might one day emerge. I have been especially blessed in my relations with the people I have encountered and new friends I have made and of course the ones (including my family) who have accompanied me throughout my personal and academic life, and so I wish to express my appreciation to all of them for showing an early and continued interest in this work.

Finally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Antonio, who has sat unwearyingly through many more *noir* films than he would have chosen to do on his own. To him, I dedicate this thesis, for all the insights and interpretations he offered at every turn, *inter alia*, his diligence, judgement, and the unstinting support which he gave.

palavras-chave

Film Noir, género cinematográfico, iconografia, padrões narrativos (flashback; voiceover), semiótica, simbolismo, estilo visual.

resumo

O conceito *film noir* é manifestamente complexo de ser definido. Atendendo a que não existe um estudo verdadeiramente completo sobre a estilística do *film noir*, esta tese, inserida no âmbito dos Estudos Cinematográficos, pretende ser uma tentativa de exploração do conceito *film noir* e do género cinematográfico sob vários aspectos. Trata-se, no fundo, de uma forma de restabelecer este conceito descritivo americano, desde o início dos anos quarenta até finais dos cinquenta, através de um processo de análise iconográfica.

Este projecto focaliza-se na seguinte questão de investigação: pode o *film noir* americano ser considerado um género cinematográfico enquanto tal? Numa primeira fase, analisam-se os contextos cinematográfico e social preexistentes no cinema *noir* de modo a compreender este fenómeno cinematográfico, enquanto uma extensão do movimento *hard-boiled*, uma cosmovisão subversiva que descaradamente se opõe aos mitos americanos da auto-promoção americana, que marcaram muitos filmes de Hollywood durante a época da Depressão. Depois, descrevem-se os movimentos culturais específicos, bem como os acontecimentos sociopolíticos da época, a psicanálise, o estruturalismo e a teoria de autor, que ajudaram a contextualizar os padrões do *film noir* e a forma como o conceito acabou por gradualmente penetrar na cultura americana.

As películas a analisar concentram-se sobre símbolos visuais específicos e elementos cinematográficos (tais como os das técnicas de iluminação e fotografia), adoptando uma perspectiva semiótica. Através dos conceitos saussuriano de “signo” e de “ícone” perceiano, procuro demonstrar de que forma os símbolos em filmes *noir* constituem significados que são enfaticamente indexicais, isto é, de que maneira eles são transversais, passando de um símbolo para outro (ou evento), direccionando e coagindo a atenção do espectador.

A tese conclui então que o filme *noir* não pode ser considerado e entendido como um género fílmico e que o seu estilo visual (o aspecto dominante do cinema *noir*) tem como propósito acentuar o desencanto sentido no rescaldo da guerra, representar os meandros da vida urbana americana e, principalmente, enfatizar a incerteza, a ansiedade e o lado obscuro da existência humana.

keywords

Film Noir, genre, iconography, narrative patterns (flashback; voiceover), semiotics, symbolism, visual style.

abstract

Film noir is a notoriously complex concept to define. Since a complete study of the stylistics of *film noir* has not yet appeared, this thesis, integrated in the area of film studies, is an endeavour to come to terms with *film noir* and film genre in a number of ways, and is essentially an earnest attempt at re-examining through a process of iconographic analysis this descriptive term applied to American films of the early forties to the late fifties.

This project concentrates on the following research question: can *film noir* be regarded as a cinematic genre as such? The cinematic and social backgrounds to *film noir* are outlined so as to understand this cinematographic phenomenon as an extension of the literary hard-boiled movement, a subversive worldview that blatantly set itself in opposition to the self-promoting American myths that had marked many Depression-era Hollywood films. Specific cultural movements and socio-political events, psychoanalysis, structuralism and *auteurism* will be explored, as they all have helped contextualise *noir* patterns, and enabled the term *film noir* to gradually gain authority in American film criticism.

The films to be analysed focus on specific visual symbols and cinematographic elements (like lighting techniques and photography), and their iconographic signification will be examined from a semiotic perspective. Through the notions of the Saussurian “sign” and the Peircean “icon”, it is intended to demonstrate how the film symbols in *noirs* give rise to signifiers which are emphatically indexical, that is, how they crosscut from one symbol (or event) to another, directing and constraining the spectator’s attention.

The thesis then concludes that *film noir*, for reasons of its complexity and indefinability, cannot be considered and understood as a film genre, and that its visual style (the dominant aspect of *noir*) spans a number of genres serving the purpose of stressing the disenchanted aftermath of the war, represents the underside of American urban life, and most especially emphasises uncertainty, anxiety, and the dark side of human existence.

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I. Introduction: Paving the Way for *Film Noir*

For many students, particularly mine, the ultimate question is not what noir was, but what it might be. They see film noir as an open-ended experience. Of course, with the short-sightedness of the young, they also see their own times – where slow internet access can be a most grievous fate – a more angst-ridden than any previous. The encapsulation effect, a selective view of the 1940s and 1950s through a noir filter, is not an easy read for those whose parents were not yet born when The Maltese Falcon was released. Still the through-line of film noir is undeniable and, in what may be the greatest irony, can be exhilarating (...). (Silver 1968:7)

This study proposes a critical interpretation of the evolution of *film noir*, bearing in mind that it is a much contested term, especially when picking through the large number of readings and views generated by a plurality of critics. Decades of definition and debate around this issue endorse how notoriously difficult it is to present a coherent, well-argued and unified designation of *film noir*. My intent is to shed light on this particularly problematical area of classical Hollywood cinema and review how it has been considered over the years. I want to stress that *film noir* is “a self-contained reflection of American cultural preoccupations in film form” (Silver & Ward 1992:1), and indeed was revived by American directors in the seventies. In fact, it has since become once again (if in a somewhat different form) a staple of entertainment cinema. My discussion will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of this field and its development, though I am aware that no matter how lengthy my description the conclusion will always be open-ended.

The work contained in this thesis brings together the diverse theoretical, historical and cultural issues which are raised by the phenomenon of *film noir*. Therefore, I discuss the subject with respect to its roots in the classical German cinema of the period following World War I, its trace elements in the French cinema antedating WWII, and the manner in which it has prospered in American cinema since. I also seek to explore the social and political circumstances and other film industry-related developments leading up to *film noir*, setting out the main historical background, and I examine it within certain cultural

frameworks, showing its dynamism and evolution, and in so doing offer an overview of an often distinguished body of films. I argue in Part I that *film noir* embodies an inexact though indispensable cultural category which helps to understand a complex phenomenon and I then demonstrate that *noir* seems to push at the usual bounds of what constitutes a genre designation. Indeed, this thesis intends to show that during its classic period, Hollywood cinema built up a consistent but flexible system of genres, including detective films, musicals, and Westerns, among others, and that *film noir* does not fall easily into such a system of classification.

Such story types as the ones mentioned above were defined by conventional plots, characters, and elements of setting, and they enabled the studios to arrange and administer production efficiently. Standing exteriors, costumes and other properties used in one film could be further used in others of the same genre. Actors and actresses well suited to the representation of stereotypical characters could be hired for numbers of similar projects. Directors, art designers, composers and the various participants in the cinema process could more easily and more competently be assigned to films of the same genre. In terms of audiences and their consumption of movies, genre also helped the industry to satisfy their tastes and pleasures, as it facilitated the communication between exhibitors and viewers, guaranteeing therefore industry stability and, more importantly, assuring a high success rate. In short, the genre system was seen as an intrinsic part of the institution of cinema, first as a tool of product definition, but more particularly, in terms of the economies of repetition and reinforcement.

When it comes to *film noir*, however, the possible combination of such elements does not occur in such a systematic manner. For this reason, Paul Schrader unequivocally asserts that “*film noir* is not a genre (...). It is not defined, as are the Western and gangsters genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood” (Schrader 1972:8). It is true that unlike Westerns, *film noir* does not have specific antecedents either in terms of a well-defined literary genre or a period in American history. This is not to claim that *film noir* is without any past history of any sort, but rather to show that it is a product of other mediating influences, of social, economic, technical and even aesthetic concerns that preceded its inception. I argue as well that the categorisation of films according to genre was acknowledged by producers and spectators alike. For the former, they most commonly called these films “psychological thrillers”, a

term that the film industry itself employed. For the latter, generic norms obviously offered (as they still do) the advantage of simplifying decision-making processes, and, from an iconographic viewpoint, posters and billboards helped draw viewers into the “generic audience” category. I further show that genres were an artificial construct with the purpose of making life easier for the movie business. I recognise that genre guided audience expectation and that studios were thus identified by their own production of films of a certain genre type: for instance, Warner Brothers was known for contemporary social problems; MGM for musicals; Paramount for sophisticated comedy-dramas, and Republic and Monogram for Westerns, and so on.

A certain identicalness was also demanded regarding the exhibitions of films. Theatres would first feature A-productions of about ninety minutes followed by B- or low-budget films which could often be screened in less than seventy-five minutes. These films were cheaper to produce as they required less lighting and smaller (not so well-known) casts, and limited-scale sets. I therefore suggest that *film noir* was a result of the B- crime film (a genre in its own right), suited to low budgets, and much associated with a particular studio – RKO. Content as well as form were decisive in making this type of film, many of them turning out to be some of the best *noir* films.¹ In order to keep spectators glued to the story as it went into its second reel, the film plot had to be constructed in a simple manner, with a strong graphic impact (somewhat different from the hard-boiled novels and pulp stories of the *Black Mask* magazine from which they may have been derived), and not liable to open interpretations. This group of films ended up reflecting the “dark” mood of anguish and insecurity that existed in the American society of the time.

The diachronic path of *film noir* is, in fact, splintered, making it difficult to apply practical categorisation, and it constantly evokes the problem Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton identified in their *Panorama du film noir américain*: “The existence over the last few years of a “*série noire*” in Hollywood is obvious. Defining its essential traits is

¹ Throughout this study, I refer to the fact that many actors and actresses whose names are closely associated with *film noir* would not know at that time that the movies they were playing in were actually *noir* productions. The best example to me still is a roundtable interview that was presented on TCM channel with Audrey Totter, Marie Windsor, Jane Greer, and Colleen Gray (whom I had the privilege to interview as well about this issue). The programme was called *The Dark Days of Summer*, and the four of them unequivocally replied they had no idea that they were playing in *noir* productions. The same point applies from the consumption point of view; no moviegoer consciously chose to watch a *noir* film instead of a musical or a Western.

another matter” (Borde & Chaumeton 2002:17).² This is precisely the task that Part I of this thesis undertakes: comprehending the complexity of the “*noir* phenomenon”, its instinctive ambiguousness (in which lies much of its fascination), interrogating its traits and core features, offering a broad cultural history of *noir* by means of a discussion and analysis of a corpus of films that have come to constitute the *noir* movement.

It may seem strange for a group of films natively American to be identified by a French term, *film noir* or “dark cinema”. Some French critics were the first to isolate certain specific features in various American movies, which could only be released in France after World War II. *Film noir* as a descriptive term was coined by cineaste Nino Frank back in 1946 as a response to the release of four crime thrillers – *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Laura* (1944) - and what seemed to him, and other critics alike, a distinctly darkened tone to contemporary American cinema, with their bleak vision of present-day life in American cities. This group of sophisticated film critics became aware of a thematic similarity that existed between these films and several novels published under the generic title of *Série Noire* or “dark series”. Its later publishing competitor, *Fleuve Noir*, used the French word for “black” to refer to some type of detective fiction. This way, most of the *Série Noire* titles were then translations of American novels and represented the work of such authors as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Cornell Woolrich, and Horace McCoy, as I shall show in Section 1, when dealing with hard-boiled novels and pulp short stories.

Regardless of any possible dates for when the classic *noir* period commenced and ended, *film noir* “has fulfilled its role by creating a particular disquiet and providing a vehicle for social criticism in the United States” (Silver 1975:23). After all, this is the reason why this kind of movie - or what could be called the “*noir* myth” – is still so powerful and prestigious today. They were indeed “a vehicle of social criticism”, as they represented the big conurbations of America with its unstable and crime-oriented population.

As stressed earlier on, scores of books and essays have been written about *noir* and yet the questions still remain - nobody seems to be certain if the films in question constitute a period, a cycle, a style or simply a tone or a mood, not to mention the problem

² *Panorama du film noir américain* is indeed still seen as a seminal book within the analysis of American culture and film, even before Hollywood itself had a name for this type of film. The version used for this thesis is a recently completed English translation (2002).

about which films themselves constitute the *noir* “canon” or which of the many elements cited are needed to define *film noir*. As I have already pointed out, my immediate objective is to review and evaluate some of these assertions and demonstrate how misleading it can be to treat *film noir* as a genre. Genre is a porous thing with no predetermined boundaries, and I justify my position in the light of the abovementioned work by Paul Schrader, where it is emphatically stated that “A film of urban nightlife is not necessarily a film *noir*, and a film *noir* need not necessarily concern crime and corruption” (1972:10-11). Above all, I hope to situate *film noir* within a set of films that have a variety of common characteristics (visually and narratively, as well as in terms of subject matters and character types), but at the same time I try to question its place within the various frames mentioned.

Throughout this project, I will put the emphasis on the notion of “style”, especially visual style, as the key element in understanding *film noir*. Those visual traits or styles might not be the exclusive originators of the *noir* cycle, but they appear to be, as Place and Peterson conclude, “the consistent thread that unites the very diverse films that together comprise this phenomenon” (in Silver 1996:65). After the classic period of the cycle had already ended, the issue of style was secondary to the search for the defining characteristics of the movement. This does not mean critics did not recognise that *film noir* deviates from the conventional methods of Hollywood in regard to its individual schemes of lighting, chiaroscuro, staging, framing, cutting, etc. Rather, it seems that the recognition of a distinctive style only emerges after it is consistently imposed on a body of work over time and thus it required the passing of time to truly identify and solidify it as a paramount element in the perception of *noir*. Along with this penchant for a certain visual style, I maintain that, aside from its definite narrative prerequisites, *noir* has a distinctive iconography with which the filmmaker’s personal vision of the world commingles and which is thoroughly consistent with a hard-headed if not actually cynical approach towards American life.

Arguably, finding out when or where “style” emerged or who possibly created it is not my purpose. What I try to do is to defend Paul Schrader’s view that “*film noir* was first of all a style, because it worked out its conflicts visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems” (Schrader 1972:9). I here seek to affirm that those (sociological) moods of paranoia, despair and claustrophobia constitute a world-view that was expressed ultimately

through the films' remarkable style, and simultaneously through the films' terse and oblique dialogues from hard-boiled fiction so popular in the thirties. In films like Rudolph Maté's *Union Station* (1950), Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948), and Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946) there is a cynical outlook that moves beyond the simple apprehension of the criminals' ways of being through an anxious, exciting combination of realism and expressionism.

I would contend, however, that although such cohesion is clearly not coincidental, there is no express chain of causality here. Visual experimentation in the gangster and horror genres during the thirties extended the number of filmmakers familiar with exterior and low-key photography. Therefore, in Chapter 1, I deal with the heritage of German Expressionism and the sensibilities of the émigrés from Germany. However, reviewing the techniques of moving camera, oddly angled shots, high contrast between light and dark shading, eccentric set designs, a gauzy focus, a chiaroscuro framing, etc, it becomes clear that the characteristic *noir* qualities or moods – those of claustrophobia and alienation – are not intrinsically connoted by the camera movements or the intensity of the light.

To the spectator the attributes of *film noir* are fairly perceptible and uncomplicated: dark streets of a night-time city, rain-washed shadows reflecting the neon signs, in short, “shadow upon shadow upon shadow” (Greenberg 1968:18). The common stylistic approach in this group of films creates certain expectations similar to those in the Western, war, or horror film. For example, in a Western film, a cowboy on horseback with a pistol may imply a gunfight, in a war movie, a set of planes may suggest an air attack, or finally in a horror film, blood stains on the floor or the neck may indicate the presence of a vampire. In *noir* films such elements may be more than a matter of style and help narrative events as they are ultimately combined with the characters' emotions and feelings. As an example, Joe Beacom (Lyle Bettger) in *Union Station* is led through a moral labyrinth, metaphorically speaking, as we see him literally squeezing through the real tunnels where he is being chased and where he eventually dies.

The characters' emotions are frequently indicative of a variety of abstractions, which are often tantamount to their mental states, such as despair, paranoia or alienation. Still, in most cases, for example, by encouraging the audience to empathise with the male protagonist's uncontrollable attraction to a female (or *femme fatale*), the *noir* director compels the spectator to coexperience both the male's hopes for ultimate salvation and

also, in the films' fundamental *noir* statement, the moral necessity of one of the protagonist's deaths, generally that of the man.

As Paul Schrader noted, "the typical *film noir* would rather move the scene cinematographically around the actor than have the actor control the scene by physical action" (1972:11). The characters were (are) surreptitiously more complex, mirroring a society which was not always or often fair. In turn, the ambiguous representation of the criminal, aggressive, misogynistic, hard-boiled and the privileging of the greedy perspectives of anti-heroes in *film noir*³ were just signs of the problems the actual society was experiencing, emphasizing the moral conflict and the lack of justice that was felt in general. In this case, the identification of a *noir* film might be achieved through the visual motifs and more recurrently in the types of protagonist and theme presented. This is the reason why I stress that *film noir* can also concentrate on characters' emotions which are, as I said above, repeatedly suggestive of certain abstractions (like, for instance, the mood of a *temps perdu*: an irreversible past, a predetermined fate and total desperation).

Through the analysis of some major *noir* productions, it is my purpose to show that the *noir* cycle is the result of a complex process that certainly takes on visual conventions, but which is also centred on extrinsic intellectual currents, such as Existentialism or Freudianism, for its dramatic significance. Finally, my goal is to concentrate on iconic notations which, in my opinion, go well beyond the visual stylistic approach and which often are not correctly elucidated by critics or are simply left unexplained. With this importance given to iconographic forms, to be explored in the film analysis in Part IV, I further elaborate on the *noir* cycle to explain it from a semiotic angle. This original approach will hopefully help isolate the various casual and intentional elements that bear out my idea of *noir* as a coalescing of film techniques into a stylistic schema.

For practical reasons, I have restricted the scope of my investigation specifically to the classic period of *film noir*, that is, 1941 to 1958, the so-called "pure *noir*" period. This time span usually encompasses two films that are often quoted as forming the outer limits of the cycle, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Touch of Evil* (1958),⁴ the latter considered to be the epitaph for *films noirs*. In seeking out films that belong to these years for analysis,

³ See Part III and the sections about the *femme fatale* and *homme fatal*.

⁴ Borde and Chaumeton, *op. cit.*, would finish this classic *noir* span in 1955 with Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). As I argue here, Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* seems amply to justify the extension of the period until 1958.

this study brings into view the general tendencies of *noir* (subdivided into three broad phases: the first, the war-time period (1940-1946 roughly) which was the moment of the private eyes of Hammett and Chandler; the second, the postwar “realistic” – and more active - period (from 1945 to 1949), ; and the third, the closing phase of *film noir* (1949 to 1958 approximately), a psychologically troubled era), and necessarily raises questions about its thematic and stylistic evolution, as well as the issues of narrative and generic differentiation which mark this particular time-frame.

Some scholars believe *film noir* never really ended, but simply declined in popularity, only to be later revived in a slightly changed form. Other critics - probably a majority - regard films (and here I would agree with them) made outside the classic period to be something other than genuine *film noir*. Most of these critics view true *film noir* as belonging to a cycle or period, and consequently, they estimate that any other succeeding film would just aim at imitating previous classic movies. Being totally aware of a *noir* style, these film directors and producers would then not be regarded as completely original as their predecessors of *film noir*.

With this study, I acknowledge Damico’s call for “the urgent need at this point for a complete restructuring of critical approach and methodology, in effect, a new attack on the subject which would be specific rather than general, inductive rather than deductive, and investigatory rather than conclusive; in short, an examination of FN [*Film Noir*] which is interested in working from the objects of study outward rather than in imposing assumptions upon those which suit such assumptions” (in Silver & Ursini 1996:99). Globally speaking, this study is meant to follow these orientations, and to avoid an “all-inclusive” approach, meaning that I will engage with the *noir* myth as a cultural phenomenon, which is much more multifaceted than just a diversity of textual conventions reflecting a social disquiet. Therefore, the first thing to call to mind is that these films echo the consequential social uncertainties of a specific time period, that is, immediately occurring during and after World War II and out of the Depression. With the immense changes in the economics and censorship of movies, *film noir* displayed a dissimilar image, contrasting with the positive message of hope that Hollywood’s musicals and screwball comedies, for example, projected.

The origin of *film noir* as a new strain in both wartime and postwar Hollywood cinema was elaborated further in French film criticism. When France started receiving the

American films after the Nazi occupation, Nino Frank, having just seen the four crime thrillers mentioned above, intuitively apprehended that they constituted “a new type of crime film”. In comparison with the older detective films which focused more on plot twists and the unveiling of the killer, Frank realised that with these films, “the essential quality is no longer “who-done-it?” but how does this protagonist act?” (in Silver & Ursini 1999b:16). Frank estimated then these *noir* films caused the traditional detective film to be outmoded, with its stereotypical protagonist “nothing more than a thinking machine”.

Recapitulating, therefore, Part II, “The Cinematic and Social Background to *Film Noir*”, comprises two sections, respectively entitled “Cultural and Literary Influences on *Film Noir*” and “Social and Political Influences on *Film Noir*”, functioning on the whole as an explanatory background to the *noir* experience, in which I subject some of the most pertinent of these sources to critical scrutiny. The various cultural, historical, social and political influences on this movement are sought out, and an attempt is made to bring the elements of this chain together in order to present *film noir* both as a dynamic and developing cultural phenomenon, and also as a disputable discursive construction.

I start by reviewing one of the immediate sources of *film noir*: the American hard-boiled detective novel – produced by writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Cornell Woolrich. This type of fiction was not particularly attractive to Hollywood during the thirties due to its hardened treatment of sex and violence, which posed a problem in the context of representational restrictions under the Production Code. The work of these American hard-boiled writers, distinguished for their use of cynical, austere and hard-bitten language, was recurrently used later as the basis for *noir* productions. As Borde and Chaumeton asserted, hard-boiled fiction constituted the fundamental and immediate influence on *film noir*’s subject matter and characterisation. In fact, many of the elements that formed *film noir* in the forties were developed a decade or more earlier in this type of fiction that reached the American public through pulp magazines. Yet, Hollywood took a while to be able to project these films (delayed until the forties), and most of them, due to censorship impositions, had to be readapted into a more undemonstrative and less aggressive manner. I will present, as succinctly as possible, the *noir* productions that were adapted from the novels of these hard-boiled writers, explaining what major contributions they brought to *film noir* in general.

Crime, violence and the modern American city were all present in the gangster films that burgeoned in the early thirties and which could not help but pave the way for *film noir* later on. The classic gangster film trilogy *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) was seminal in the representation of the subversive image of the gangster, and certainly defined the genre: iconically, from fast cars to luxurious fedoras and “fancy molls”; in narrative terms, the gangster as the modern entrepreneur and his story of immediate rise and inevitable fall; visually, with conventional studio (and for the majority) interchangeable settings and flatter lighting backgrounds. In acknowledging gangster films as a genre and the profound influence they exerted on *film noir*, I discriminate them from *noir* movies as the latter are more self-conscious and more versatile in their storytelling patterns and more diverse in their lighting techniques, in their use of chiaroscuro, for example. The authentic physical maze of the *noir* city does not have the same heightened presence in gangster films. The gangster is often a public figure who moves about in the neutral places of the city with a kind of low profile realism, whereas the doom-laden *noir* hero is generally a denizen of the mundane world of the city, which only occasionally collides with the more fantastical world of organised crime.

The Gothic legacy is presented as the other large tradition of “blood melodrama” which was just as significant in generating the *noir* style. Dark mysteries related to the supernatural sphere and depicting psychological horror were often present in the English Gothic romances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (considered as the forerunner of the type) to the works of Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley with her novel *Frankenstein*, the influence of the genre would later be noticed in certain conventions of *noir* period films such as *Gaslight* (1944) and *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), or in Robert Wise’s *The House on Telegraph Hill* (1951). These films were indeed seemingly modelled on the Gothic novels which would often portray lively young women, usually in the role of governesses or new brides. As a rule, they ended up living in labyrinthine ominous mansions peopled by odd servants and feeling attracted to the enigmatic good looking men of the house.

The central enigma in the Gothic plot is normally constructed around the figures of husband and wife, in which the husband bears a malicious anger towards his spouse. These settings and their symbols would later be exploited in *noir* productions, with Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* (1940) standing as the classic example. In fact, in the *noir* inflection of this type

we also find a disruption of the woman's everyday world, like in Litvak's *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), in which the female protagonist (Barbara Stanwyck) gets killed, or Orson Welles's *The Stranger* (1946), with Mary's life in jeopardy because her husband, Charles Rankin (Orson Welles), is misidentified as the genocidal Frank Kindler. But, as *film noir* continued into the fifties, the imperilled victim-heroine of the Gothic romances gave way to the male-oriented crime thriller (the third phase of *film noir* that I mentioned above).

Finally, the narrative elements present in the Gothic romance, such as chaos, alienation, and fear migrated to the American *noir* style, generating the above Gothic *noirs* which share a strong resemblance to hard-boiled *noir* productions in terms of style and themes. However, while the Gothic novels concentrated on exploiting the mental conflicts and disturbances of their female characters, *film noir* was more concerned with the individual cases of decay and corruption inherent in an underworld dominated by men. It should be further explained that the breach that exists between good and evil is well defined in the Gothic novels and maintains moral (and social, for that matter) stability, whereas in *noir* this type of narrative clarity seems to be non-existent. I hence conclude that here too *film noir* eludes easy genre classification.

Expressionism flourished in Germany from approximately 1910 to the mid-twenties, and as a cross-cultural movement encompassing the different arts, it attempted to express the distortions, chaos and despair of modern life during the period of recovery following World War I. I show how the German filmmakers developed their own style by using symbolism and *mise-en-scène* to suffuse their films and provide them with a deeper mood and meaning. German Expressionism was translated into films through distorted images and delusory transformations of reality. The filmmakers of the German UFA studio would convey their dark themes (of dreams and visions, paranoid states of mind) using a distinct visual style (primarily chiaroscuro and high-contrast lighting) where the minimalist space is fractured into an extreme fabric of unbalanced lines and surfaces. Some famous and influential examples will be briefly discussed, like Robert Wiene's *Das Kabinet des Dr Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, 1920) or Stellan Rye's *Der Student von Prag* (*The Student of Prague*), first released in 1913, but remade in Expressionist style in 1926 (under Henrik Galeen's direction), with the archetypal *Doppelgänger* story. Both films, concerned with the instability and volatility of identity, find multiple resonances in *film noir*.

I back up my view that *film noir* is prominently a visual style and by showing how its gloomy mood (*Stimmung* in German) was strongly influenced by German Expressionism and Weimar cinema as a whole. In *noir* dramas, the presence of these symbols and visual motifs (which I explore in the light of semiotics in the fourth part of this study) suggests the fear and anxiety that prevail in the characters. A reliable trace element of Expressionism throughout *noir* is the nightmare sequence or the dream interlude, such as in *Murder, My Sweet*, in which the camera seems to penetrate the private eye's mind and suggest a completely disordered and intimidating world beyond control.

French Poetic Realism of the late thirties, in particular in its illustrations of Paris and Marseille, has also had a palpable effect on the American *film noir*, especially as it is noticeable in the films of Julien Duvivier, Pierre Chenal, and Marcel Carné, also known as the "three greats". I characterise the heightened aestheticism of this film movement which led up to World War II and helped to bridge German Expressionism and classical Hollywood cinema, through its stylistic and thematic influences. The major representational aspects of these films will be specified - the fact that they lay emphasis on marginalised characters who search out for a last chance at love, but who are in the end let down and disenchanted – and I demonstrate that the tone of nostalgia and resentment to be found in these movies impacted on the subsequent *film noir* generation. I also argue that films like *Pépé le Moko* (1937) or Marcel Carné's *Quai des Brumes* (*Port of Shadows*, 1938), while creating a certain *noir* realism, did not predict American *film noir*, as in the first instance, the notions of oneirism and strangeness (discussed by Borde and Chaumeton and which, according to them, categorise *film noir*) are entirely absent in these films from the years 1936-1938. Indeed, although also termed "*noir*", these French films not only brought into focus a more fatalistic edge, they also described a more unhinged and morally reprehensible world with a "hint at revolt, while love was passing by them as a mirage of a better world" (Chartier 1946:67-70), and their characters, as desperate as they look, simply "plead for our pity and our sympathy" (ibid.). Although American *film noir* creates a different fictional world, cineastes such as Nino Frank in "Un nouveau genre policier: L'aventure criminelle" or Jean-Pierre Chartier in "Les Américains aussi font des films noirs", both articles published in 1946, labelled these morality stories *noir* because of the prevailing darkness and the similar trends (in terms of style and content) that converged

both in these French productions of the late thirties and the American movies so newly arrived in France.

Section 1 is concluded with an analysis of the so-called American Expressionism in films. I seek to explain how the cycle of horror films produced by Universal Studios in the early thirties (launched by the American Tod Browning's *Dracula* and the British James Whale's *Frankenstein*) was also a key influence on the studio's *noir* productions, starting with Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and Siodmak's *Phantom Lady* (1944). During his Hollywood career, James Whale, a man with a great feeling for Gothic forms, directed (and sporadically produced) about twenty movies, most of them for Universal Pictures. He attained his international renown with *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Old Dark House* (1932), *The Invisible Man* (1933), and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). These films will be discussed in this section, along with those of Val Lewton (specifically, *Cat People* (1942) and *The Leopard Man* (1943)), as they constitute a whole series of visually distinctive and high aesthetic quality productions, which, in turn, helped to create an innovative bridge to *film noir*.

I believe this first section serves the useful purpose of comprehending the amalgam of varied cultural and literary circumstances that were around at the inception of the *noir* phenomenon, even if "cultural history is too diffuse to allow for clear casual relationships; the most it can attempt is to establish a chain of plausibility" (Maltby & Craven 1995:38). It is crucial then to acknowledge the extent to which *noir* was the product of a variety of forms and pressures rising both from within and from outside the Hollywood cinema of the forties.

In Section 2 I further contextualise *film noir*, this time from a social and political viewpoint. I demonstrate that *film noir* also contains visible signs of the detailed conditions of production and reception of the forties and fifties period, during which the American film industry experienced an ongoing and deep transformation. Once the last menaces to the return to peace became less apparent, an intense anti-communist campaign set in after the war and represented the most long-lasting obsession of American society. This particular period in the United States is known as the Second Red Scare, and is commonly associated with "McCarthyism". The climate of fear and paranoia in American society, the Cold War against Communism, and the threat of nuclear destruction are often reflected in

the *noir* cycle, with films like Jules Dassin's *Night and the City* (1950) or Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).

For more than three decades the Catholic Church through its Legion of Decency retained the means and the power to control the content of Hollywood films. I here document the way Hollywood studios submitted their films for approval (or outright disapproval) and consequent rating, and I interpret the way these censorial bodies dictated to executive producers the amount of sex and violence that was allowable on the screen. Two distinct moments in Hollywood filmmaking will then be considered: the period which is often termed "Pre-Code" (1930-1934) and the years that followed it, when the Production Code was adopted with all its guidelines and principles. I describe its mechanisms and the three "General Principles" that first appeared in order to understand why European Cinema could address themes, topics and problems in a much less restricted way than classical Hollywood Cinema. Appendix II, at the end of this dissertation, contains those general principles and the particular applications prescribed by "The Motion Picture Production Code". This appendix should therefore help to explain the many scenes in *noir* films, especially those related with sexual liaisons and their consequences, which had to be properly "adjusted" to render them more suitable by the rules of the Code.⁵ As I address the Code itself, I will emphasise how much it was imposed on *noir* directors and producers in an attempt to play themes such as villainy in a "poetic" manner, or depict sexual content (for example, a persistent but somewhat innocent kiss as a metonymy for lovemaking, or, from a semiotic point of view, in *Out of the Past* (1947) where symbols like the fishing nets and the rain or even more pragmatically the double-entendres between a door flying open and fireworks going off are suggestive of a powerful sexual magnetism).

The objective is to understand the reasons why some *noir* films, arresting in their sophisticated visual style and thematic duplicity, were initially banned by the Hollywood Production Code censors, as was for example *Double Indemnity*.⁶ The complexity of this wartime censorship may have restricted the range of themes and issues introduced by

⁵ Paragraph II. Sex. "Scenes of Passion – a) They should not be introduced when not essential to the plot; b) Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown; c) In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element." See Code on p. 465.

⁶ *Double Indemnity* is also said to have been blacked out by wartime restrictions on lights. This will also be further explained in this chapter.

Hollywood feature films but it did not wholly prevent hard-boiled film adaptations, which showed that *film noir* was pushing at the limits of what was permissible.

In political terms, disillusionment came from many directions but the first of these we should consider the war and postwar maladjustment, the subsequent difficult process of reorientation and readjustments of returning veterans which gave *film noir* its particular social context. We should understand that:

The need to produce Allied propaganda abroad and promote patriotism at home blunted the fledgling movies towards a dark cinema, and the *film noir* thrashed about in the studio system, not quite able to come into full prominence. During the War the first uniquely *noir* films appeared: *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Glass Key*, *This Gun for Hire*, *Laura*, but these films lacked the distinctly *noir* bite the end of the war would bring. (in Silver 1996:54)

Thus, in the subsection called “Postwar Readjustment”, I refer to a specific set of circumstances in the Hollywood production system, establishing a clear distinction between the pre- and wartime periods, and focussing on how much *noir* aesthetics evolved or at least was redefined in stylistic and Expressionistic terms. Films like *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) deliberately address wartime veterans’ feelings of isolation after they returned. About this, Biesen’s observations provide some orientation in regard to the psychological atmosphere that American society was experiencing at that time:

These early *noir* films created a psychological atmosphere that in many ways marked a response to an increasingly realistic and understandable anxiety – about war, shortages, changing gender roles, and “a world gone mad” – that was distinctive from the later postwar paranoia about the bomb, the cold war, HUAC,⁷ and the blacklist, which was more intrinsic to late 1940s and 1950s *noir* pictures. (Biesen 2005:3)

However, it was not only the returning soldiers who were confronted with a disillusioning reality. The divisions which had been repressed during the ideological compromises of wartime also contributed to the psychological atmosphere that Schrader mentions. Moreover, American women entered the labour force in high numbers during the war, making them economically emancipated and free to live without the help of a man or the returning veterans. Still on the work side, labour unions had been under strong pressure, prohibited to strike during the war, and now demanded longed-for benefits. From

⁷ House Un-American Activities Committee (my footnote).

a political point of view, the defeat of the Axis powers did not contribute to an enhanced worldwide security as the Cold War erupted almost straight away creating disquiet about Communist infiltration. These sets of social, political and historical events will underpin how much censorship was largely responsible for the “art of omission” applied by producers to films in the 1940-58 period, and at the same time they might help us understand why *noir* style evokes such an intimidating environment, the perfect setting for crime, alienation and paranoia.

While *film noir* explores key social issues, namely those related to the criminal underworld, its roots go deep into Existentialism and Freudianism. The first was much entwined with surrealist values displayed in the works of French intellectuals, such as Jacques Prévert and André Breton, as a means of challenging bourgeois art and of embracing socialism. The interpretation of existentialism or “existential motifs”, as Robert Porfirio has put it, present in many *noirs* are revealed through the entrapped *noir* non-heroic character who, often by unfortunate mishap, enters a world of chaos and dramatic isolation, usually in the night-time city.

The stress on perverse psychology in *noir* films (also evidenced in the work of the above French writers) emerged with the broadly fashionable dissemination of Freudian psychoanalysis in the America of the forties. The abundance of Freudian motifs will be discussed, placing in the foreground the psychology of crime and the psychological upshots of the criminal act. The darker, inner impulses of the *noir* protagonists, sometimes beyond their own control, lead them to be enmeshed in the commission of crime. I thus elaborate that Freudianism is key to *noir*’s visual style and narrative strategies, which root themselves in the characters’ emotions. The meaning of subjective drama, for example, is intensified by these narrational strategies (flashbacks and voiceover narration) found in many *noir* films, like Boris Ingster’s Germanic direction of *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940), a film which stresses paranoia and claustrophobia, and which contains a highly artificial *mise-en-scène*, notably through an extended oneiristic dream / reality sequence. While it is true that these models and/or emotions frequently suggest some abstractions, such as estrangement in *noirs* of the forties, I invoke them to reinforce the argument of this thesis: a) to show that *film noir* deploys more than consistent visual style and recurrent narrative patterns; b) to suggest that it is open to “external constructions” (as I will show

throughout this work); and c) to disassociate it from any simplistic or easy genre categorisation.

Part *III* takes up the topic of themes and contents, concentrating on the central archetypes portrayed in *noir*, specifically “the male victim” (often called the *non-heroic hero*) and the duplicitous *femme fatale*. This part of the study links directly to the previous one since the examined *noir* themes and motifs hold up a “dark mirror” to American society, in other words, to *film noir*’s fundamental fixation on paranoia and despair. In subsection 1, I turn back to (American) existentialist themes (with a reference to film novels by hard-boiled writers, such as Cornell Woolrich), as a prevailing view of *film noir*, engaging existential themes of isolation and anxiety with the ones taken from a generalised Freudianism (schizophrenia, insanity and disturbed sexuality) debated in Part *II*.

The city, a *noir* character in its own right, and its life are analysed in detail as this is to where the *noir* narrative gravitates and where the events fatalistically occur. By now, it is clear that the *noir* universe revolves around causality, but it is in the city that the *noir* figures, whatever good intentions and high hopes they might have, will inevitably succumb to a foreshadowed conclusion. Shadows and dark alleys or the back doors of underworld places and luxurious apartments are all part of the scenario, differently characterised spaces in the unscrupulous city and its suburbs that reek of the night and which give form to “the fatalistic nightmare” of its *noir* inhabitants. The *noir* labyrinth is always found in the specifics of cities like Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco, and so I will discuss the subject of spatiality and the city in *film noir*, not only through the physical, labyrinthine streets, but also through the various intertextual discourses swirling around the films (the journeys and quests of the heroes, or high-rise and tower living, for example). I will refer to the way that Dimendberg compares the “centripetal” *noir* city, associated with cities from the early part of the *noir* cycle like New York (with representation of the urban space in Dassin’s *The Naked City* (1948) and the photojournalistic style of Weegee), to the “centrifugal” *noir* city of Los Angeles, for instance, connected with films set on highways and in suburbs.

The *femme fatale* is unquestionably the most subversive element in *noir* productions. In this subsection, I consider what her main role is in these films, namely in comparison with traditional images of womanhood set within the nuclear family. Trapped in a universe dominated by male, the *femme fatale* (seen by many as an empowered

woman) is willing to use any weapon, including (especially) her own sexuality to challenge male patriarchy, even if that means provoking her own destruction. Powerful and seductive, these *femmes fatales*, like Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, or Vera in *Detour* (1945), will resort to anything including murder. Interwoven with the wartime changes in the role of women, I examine the postwar *noir* thrillers which describe the problems represented by women who are in search of satisfaction and personal definition, breaking with the traditional contexts of marriage and family.

Similarly to the different types of *noir* male protagonists, there are basically three types of women that appear throughout the *noir* cycle. The good woman and wife that Joan Wyatt plays in *Pitfall* (1948) represents the stifling domesticity of the forties and fifties or, as I will attempt to show, she is the emblem of deeply set misogyny (the psychology of this is the castrating female who demonstrates throughout the film that family is rigid and refuses thus to forgive her husband's infidelity). The more intimidating (more common) marrying type who usually substitutes the *femme fatale* as the source of the hero's anxiety and danger is conveniently projected through Bertha Duncan in *The Big Heat* (1953), for example. And then there is the *femme fatale*, whose unconstrained sexuality is indeed fatal to herself and to the hero in the *film noir* of the forties, as is the case of Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* or Nora Prentiss in Vincent Sherman's *Nora Prentiss* (1947). As a few *noirs* are explicitly woman-centred, I will also refer to films that contain different facets of the roles of women in *film noir*. Some of these women can be regarded as empowered women, some simply as monsters. In the case of Mildred (Joan Crawford) in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) she is not a detective, but she plays the hard-boiled detective's counterpart and goes through abuse and beatings similar to those experienced by private-eyes Marlowe or Spade. Whether Mildred can be considered an emergent heroine of the forties or not, her daughter Veda (Ann Blyth) plays the prototype of the *femme fatale* who raises havoc throughout *film noir*.

I then move on to the *noir* non-hero who appears to be trapped in his own fate, in cities that seem to leave him disorientated. From the private eye in *The Maltese Falcon* to the detective in *The Big Sleep* (1946), both chasing criminals through the dark, rain-soaked streets of the American city, I explain how the typical hero of *film noir* constitutes a stark contrast to the traditional Hollywood hero. These conflicted hard-boiled private eyes were often morally-ambiguous figures themselves working for the F.B.I. or other government

bodies, or as killers and crooks, but they often show signs of a redeeming personality (or a capacity for redemption). With this new vision of the detective and his world, *film noir* showed itself not to be bound by conventional rules of morality, by offering for example a *sui generis* treatment of homosexuality, like that of Joel Cairo (Peter Lorre) in the role of an insinuating criminal in *The Maltese Falcon*. I also seek to analyse the male counterpart to the deadly female and the opposite of the male victim - the *homme fatal* - with his thrilling combination of manipulative charm and deep-rooted sexual sadism and perversity. I will also make a parallel analysis to that of female archetypes specifically that of the *homme attrapé*, a figure who happens to be a mixture of both submission and confrontation to social demands. I therefore propose to look at the male archetypes in *film noir*, offering a close reading of masculinity in *film noir*.

The next subsection ("Dazed and Confused: the Voiceover / Flashback Narration") focuses on the narrative strategies that *film noir* employs and again how they significantly differ from the classical Hollywood mode of storytelling. Whilst Hollywoodian filmmakers favoured a style that would contain straightforward narratives, or a cause-and-effect chain of events with a given continuity in the arrangement of shots to provide a consistent story in which no questions or ambiguities remain, the essential paradigm of *film noir* resides in a kind of restrictive narration so as to keep the spectator intentionally in the dark about the hints or enigmas that make up the secrecy that the text unravels. Voiceovers and flashbacks are then the two major techniques explored by *noir* directors, as they both give the viewer insight into the character's motivations and they contribute to the confessional tone of these films. The non-diegetic voices used in *film noir* were also an attempt to replicate the first person narration of the pulp fiction novels from which, as I said above, many *noirs* were adapted, and they emphasised the elliptical and twisting nature of *noir* storylines.

The purpose of the next two subsections (on *noir* visual style and the role of jazz) is to support my point that style is paramount in *noir* features and that it plays a more important function than theme (whereas American critics, as Paul Schrader argues (1972: 15), have been traditionally more interested in theme than style). The "dark, hard-edged look" and the strong feeling of alienation from the *noir* protagonists are often a more graphic illustration of *noir*'s stylistic outlook which is nearly always found in the *noirs* of the forties and fifties. These films share visual motifs and, for that reason, I maintain that the conflicts that their characters experience are represented and resolved more often than

not visually rather than thematically. It is amidst urban settings, night scenes, under the rain or on wet streets, that the *noir* romantic narration develops and that the *noir* hero finds his own identity. Through the creative and artistic style of cinematographers, such as John Alton and Nicholas Musuraca, *film noir* manages to come up with artistic correlatives to sociological problems.

As for jazz, although it has always seemed to have an image problem (either considered to be too snobbish or even esoteric), it does have an embodiment that has demonstrated enduringly popular and attractive to filmmakers and public alike. In the case of *film noir*, we often hear the expression “jazz *noir*”, and this illustrates the prevalence of this type of music in American cinema of the forties and fifties. There is almost a symbiotic interaction between jazz, smoke, *femmes fatales*, rainy nights and cynical detectives. In this subsection, I seek to understand the perceived association that exists between jazz and *film noir*, describing one as the musical complement to the visual icons of the other or, figuratively speaking, the shadows cast by one were manifestly echoed in the sounds of the other. I will thus refer to the soundtracks of certain *noir* productions, such as *Phantom Lady* (1944), *The Killers* (1946) and *D.O.A* (1950), in order to show that the “cool jazz” that is played in these films gives them their “atmospheric background” and their depressing tone. Finally, I will refer to the rhythmic features of jazz and explain the use that is made of the cadence of the bass and drums in *Phantom Lady* as being in touch with “jazz’s primitivism” and sexual component.

As *noir* films began to combine studio scenes with real locations (when basing their stories on real sources like newspapers, magazines and public records), their style changed. By providing on-location documentary shooting, nonprofessional actors, and a dependence on documentary artefacts, the quasi-documentary realism shows the influence of the Italian neorealist movement of the forties and is an acknowledged determinant on later *film noir* documentary style. In this chapter, it is my intention to discuss how *film noir* embodies a political critique (going from street criminality and political corruption to police procedures), usually observed in the docu-*noir*, a style which appeared in the second phase of *film noir*, and which points the finger at the potentially oppressive instruments of the capitalist state – the police forces, the F.B.I. (Hathaway’s *House on 92nd Street*, 1945), the Treasury Department, the immigration service (Anthony Mann’s *Border Incident*, 1949), and even public health services (Elia Kazan’s *Panic in the Street*, 1950). The idea of

these films was to confer on them an authenticity and to stress the social awareness behind such productions. By the end of the film, the spectator would feel that no matter what kind of (social) danger existed, it would be defeated by the strength and integrity of these democratic institutions. Despite offering screen realism, the semi-documentary *noirs* maintained their *noir* mood which was produced principally by the choice of setting, lighting design, and characters portrayed.

Part *III* is concluded with an exploration of the *noir auteur* and my personal choice of three *noir* film directors. The term *auteur* originated in film criticism of the recent past, whereas the concept of genre dates back to literary critical practices, appearing long before the advent of the cinema. The two concepts are often regarded as being antithetical, as *auteurism* and its theory focus on the unique “signature” of a certain artist, and the expression of an individual sensibility would seem to transcend the restrictive limits of “genre”.

“Auteur theory” aimed to be provocative at the time of its appearance (and still provokes much stir today). Both sides of the Atlantic expressed divergences but not so much in the arena of practical filmmaking as in critical attitudes to pre-existing canons of film art. Influenced by those of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the British opened their first issue of *Movie* with a list of American and British directors and assessed their performances under a ranking system of “great” (where the names of Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock were included) and “brilliant” (Joseph Losey and Orson Welles, for example). Andrew Sarris, from the American side, coined the term “auteur theory” in his “Notes on the Auteur Theory” where he lists the fourteen top directors who had worked in the US and who are worth a place in his pantheon. For this film critic, it is vital to establish the “evaluative distinction” between an *auteur* and a *metteur-en-scène*, as the former, he argues, is capable of keeping uniformity of style and theme by pushing the limits of the modes of cinematic production. The director, Sarris writes,

(...) is both the least necessary and most important component of filmmaking. He is the most modern of all artists in his relative passivity toward everything that passes before him. He would not be worth bothering with if he were not capable now and then of sublimity of expression almost miraculously extracted from his money-oriented environment. (Sarris 1996:37)

Sarris's eleven categories in which he places various directors (according to their "sublimity of expression") may now sound a bit idiosyncratic. In fact, this kind of disagreement was further enhanced when British *Sight and Sound*, influenced by the French *nouvelle vague*, started to fiercely condemn the "critical excesses" of *Cahiers*. In America, film critic Pauline Kael reacted vehemently in her article "Circles and Squares" to the appraisal of Hollywood directors made by Sarris. It outraged her that Sarris would consider the "artistic signature" to represent the real value of the art itself. She then gives the example that Hollywood directors were unavoidably operating within very tight budgets and sometimes using source material of low artistic value. More central than this discussion between an *auteur* and *metteur-en-scène* is the legitimate question of whether the director should be regarded as the primary creator of a film (with a reference to those aspects of *mise-en-scène* in *film noir* that determine the manner in which everything is visualised on screen). R. Barton Palmer argues that "*Auteurism* became a way of explaining and dealing with *film noir*, even as that critical concept was passed over in silence" (Palmer 1994:15). At the same time, these directors could be regarded and valued as authors (*auteurs*) because their films reflected their own ideas and would incorporate their own style. Their productions would thus be a manner of showing a refusal to conform or to make films that would be rigorously commercial, at least from an ideological and aesthetical point of view. I describe then how this critical and evaluative approach was made problematic, especially after the political and cultural events that followed in the late fifties and sixties (May 1968 in France, for example).

From amongst the great variety of "masters of chiaroscuro" who arrived from Europe, particularly from Germany and Austria - John Alton, Robert Siodmak, Fritz Lang, Joseph H. Lewis, Jacques Tourneur, Douglas Sirk, Fred Zinnemann, Anthony Mann, Jules Dassin – and who have subsequently attained *auteur* status, I have selected two for whom *film noir* was, so to speak, like a drum in their heads, and whose dominant styles and themes I therefore analyse in depth: Billy Wilder and Otto Preminger. Both émigrés from Vienna, they have been selected for the "revolutionary techniques" they developed and honed in their country of origin (particularly the "moving cameras, severely angled shots, low-key photography, and innovative uses of light and shadow" (Christopher 1997:14)). The third, Orson Welles, was selected for using many of the same characteristics (especially the flashbacks) but at the same time for being so multifaceted as an actor,

writer, director, producer, and artist. In analysing the filmography of these three directors (all three with a background in theatre), I try to isolate their singularity and in so doing analyse their unique contributions to the *noir* cycle.

Thus, I study Wilder's four pictures in the *noir* style over seven years, from 1944 with his *Double Indemnity* to 1951 with *Ace in the Hole* (aka *The Big Carnival*). I will show how much these films are imbued with a distinctive and recognisable style. Being a tough and independent writer, his courage (others may call it cynicism) was evident in fearless films, such as *The Lost Weekend* (1945) which deals with a social problem frontally. His individual insights and approaches make him the most idiosyncratic Euro-filmmaker, well-known to Hollywood front offices for provoking audiences' sensibilities. As well as his celebrated and influential *oeuvre* as a director, he is one of the best screenwriters of all time.

In regard to Orson Welles, because his *oeuvre* is already much discussed and for reasons of space, I confine myself to three of his major productions: *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948), which serves my investigation in terms of the censorship and cine-semiotic issues it raises, and *Touch of Evil*,⁸ which, as I have pointed out, brings the classic *noir* period to a close. I will highlight Welles's radical work on *Citizen Kane*, for example, in its stunning use of deep focus, low angles, high contrast and dark shadows, and the ideal collaboration he achieved with cinematographer Gregg Toland. Such was Orson Welles's respect for the huge contribution Toland made to the film that he insisted their names run on the same title card in the film's closing credits. On the whole, it is through his sometimes complex mystery stories, involving a puzzle-within-a-puzzle, his degree of inspired improvisation, persistently exploring new possibilities during the course of a shoot, that Welles's fundamental work helped to redefine film language.

Finally, I move on to analyse Otto Preminger as an *auteur*, concentrating on the way he was able, like Wilder, to tackle the controversial subject without hypocrisy. I will first centre on his initial success in Hollywood with classic *noir*, *Laura* (1944), and then look at his other major films: *Fallen Angel* (1946), *Whirlpool* (1950) and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950), on all of which he also worked as producer. Preminger left behind a very mixed collection of films (ranging from a series of hard-boiled thrillers, screwball comedies, tragedy / dramas) but it is his background in the theatre that was unquestionably

⁸ These two films are also relevant for this work as they were both shortened and recut against the director's wishes.

a factor in the evolution of his style. “Other directors, such as Fred Zinnemann and William Wyler, who began their careers in film studios from the start, have always tended to shoot a scene from every possible angle and then assemble the whole thing in the cutting room”, he explained in an interview published in 1979. “But I started my career in the theatre and therefore I see the whole finished production before me” (in Pratley 1971:89). Otto Preminger manages thus to assume a directorial attitude of detachment and neutrality that was interpreted as his personal hallmark, as well as a certain fluidity achieved through a visual style that insists on expanded compositions, with little cutting of a scene into shots and counter-shots.

Part IV sets out to be a semiotic analysis of key *noir* features and thus focuses on iconographic signification in *film noir* in general. Through this part of the thesis and with the help of semiotics, I try to chart the ways in which (cinematographic and artistic) meanings are produced in *film noir* through (recurrent) representations of objects, and hence to further understand *film noir* from its artistic and historical angles. In the first subsection, called “From a Semiotic Perspective”, I first discuss the notion of film symbol from a cine-semiotic perspective. I refer to the Saussurian notions of “signifier” and “signified”, and how together they form a sign. With his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes carried Saussure’s linguistic notions into other domains of cultural theory, creating a new theoretical system known as “Structuralism”. I explain how these two disciplines – structuralism and film semiotics – aligned themselves in relation to genre films, and the manner they contributed to a symptomatic reading of American culture through a study of the elements and rules structuring its cinema-reality.

I then compare the concept of “symbol” as used in the theories of Christian Metz and Robert Stam. For Saussure there seems to be a conventionalisation between the signifier and the signified, rather than a similarity (for this reason, Saussure considered that non-symbolic signifying systems make a more appropriate object for semiotics). For Metz the arbitrary sign of linguistics is different in the context of cinema, and therefore he discards a theoretical model for film based on verbal language (for filmic signification, he argues, does not at all look like verbal language). As his goal is to describe the processes of signification in the cinema, I will contrast his forensic attitude towards film theory, with the work of other semioticians as well. I describe how Metz cleaves the field in two parts, the filmic and the cinematographic, and show why, in contrast to certain other languages,

cinema does not have the power of “double articulation” (cinema’s signifiers are just too closely tied to their signifieds), and thus film language works utterly unlike verbal language.

I consider that the term *symbol* has many context-dependent meanings, highlighting the fact that those symbols in *film noir* can serve as plot elements and that they revolve around heroes and characters (implicated in scams or con games most of the times) in visually complex settings. A medium of expression rather than a system of communication, I interpret how cinema and these films in particular isolate logical mechanisms to convey specific messages to a spectator. Since semiotics aims at the laws governing the production and reception of those messages (at the possibility of filmic speech itself), formulating the rules at work (the codes) in those films, I hope to show that within this spectrum of codes lies the innumerable non-specific cultural codes which cinema shares with other media, and which have been transposed to the movies. In the case of *film noir*, we could point here to the chiaroscuro lighting, a code specific to painting but one which was employed incessantly in German Expressionist films. Or the narrative techniques that abound in *noir* productions, such as flashbacks, and which can be found in literature as well as in cinema. Finally, this category of “code”, which after all pertains to all systems of communications, enables us to identify genres, periods, and *auteurs* in film. I thus want to demonstrate that in the case of *film noir* these codes are not what define *noir* as such (*noirs* are not so deeply coded, for example, as cowboy films with particular codes of dress, landscape, and behaviour which appear in no other kinds of films, or screwball comedies, a subgenre of the comedy films genre, featuring farcical circumstances, usually involving courtship and (re)marriage). They deny *film noir*, therefore, in my perspective, easy genre categorisation, and rather take us into the spheres of classification by motif and tone.

In subsection 2 of this Part, entitled “The Universe of Motifs and Symbols in *Film Noir*”, I propose to construct a framework around the significance of icons and motifs in the chosen *noir* films, illustrating the way they engage the viewer and discussing what cinematographic resources, image strategies and conventions film directors have used in their films. Therefore, I am in search of the distinctive patterns that bear out my contention that visual motifs play a key role in generating meaning and contain a hitherto unexplored power in *film noir* as a visual style.

I then analyse four *noir* films directed by renowned *noir* filmmakers: Lang, Siodmak, Tourneur and Lewis. Again, this selection of films was carefully thought over as they represent major productions (from 1945 to 1955), covering most of the period of classic *noir* in its diverse forms. The main idea at this stage is to recognise how much they have contributed to the development of *film noir*, and more importantly, to elaborate on the objects that appear in these films (and often in others), and interpret them in the light of Peirce's concept of "icons", which resemble, he says, their conceptual object in various ways.

Scarlet Street (1945), directed by Fritz Lang, is an English language remake of the 1931 film *La Chienne* by Jean Renoir. The film stars Edward G. Robinson, Dan Duryea and Joan Bennett, and in their roles, the trio explore themes of Freudian desire. I look at the symbols which are traded throughout the film for something or someone that Chris can never have. I thus demonstrate that even the paintings that Chris paints as a personal hobby have symbolic repercussions as a means of escaping his colourless life and loveless marriage. By deciphering and understanding these visual symbols,⁹ I recognise that they are often as vital as the characters themselves and even determine the course of the plot.

I also want to refer to the *mise-en-abyme* of the film, stressing the visual experience of the characters standing, for example, in front of a mirror or between two mirrors. By doing so, it will be more evident that the treatment of the figure of Chris implies a subversion of the traditional Hollywood conventions regarding normative conceptions of masculinity. I will finally endorse critic E. Ann Kaplan's position about the corrosive vision of patriarchy and how it is presented in *Scarlet Street*. This then causes a problem in the narrative and brings about the destruction of Chris Cross. In sum, I intend to show how *film noir* engenders these images of masculinity in crisis.

Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* (1946) is the second film I deal with from a semiotic point of view. The story takes place in a big old sinister New England Victorian mansion, where there is a local serial killer on the loose murdering only young women with "physical afflictions". Andrew Spicer underlines the arresting capacity of this director to operate with cameras and obtain striking visual effects in this film:

⁹ I will also make a reference to other *noir* films in which symbols like the ones depicted in *Scarlet Street* appear (for instance, the paintings in *Laura* or *Night and the City* or the clock in *The Big Clock*.)

Before working on *The Dark Mirror*, Siodmak was loaned out to direct *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), a co-production between RKO and David O. Selznick's Vanguard Films. Although the story is a standard Gothic noir set in turn-of-the-century New England, *The Spiral Staircase* is the most beautifully crafted of Siodmak's films, superbly paced with the suspense steadily accumulating in intensity aided by the expressive cinematography of Nicholas Musuraca. (Spicer 2002:116)

Both the film director and cinematographer Musuraca provide a combination of elements present in the Gothic *noir*: an old dark and gloomy house, rumbles of thunderstorms, chiaroscuro lighting, and shadowy rooms traversed by a flickering candle, eerie musical scores, banging shutters from the wind, windows mysteriously opened, a maniacal killer, and an enormous isolated place filled with ill-omened sounds. Together, these hoary elements are transformed in this film into an artistic tale of mystery and suspense. Even the title of the film is redolent of secrecy, creating suspense and functioning itself as a major metonymic symbol which deciphers disturbed inner worlds through complex camera effects.

Therefore, the “spirality” found in the film will be discussed in detail, reinforcing the exploitation of conceptual contiguity through the trope of metonymy. At this level, I will show, cinematic meta-language deployed in the movie also helps characterise the inner self of the protagonists. In fact, the cinematographer manages to intensify our perception of reality by making visible the unconscious life, or to put it another way, the camera reflects here what one could call the “optical unconscious”. I delve into how the filmic apparatus of *noir* (the conceptions built into the film as ideas and filmic axes) interact with our own perceptions as viewers.

Finally, I will refer to the impact that period films had on *film noir*, even though these films were not significantly concerned with the generalised moral decay and corruption found in the majority of *noir* productions. Most importantly, with the semiotic analysis of this film, I hope to prove that *film noir* embraces a variety of genres (*The Spiral Staircase* is an effectively unsettling Gothic *noir* film) and that *noirs* do not always have to happen, for example, in an urban setting or even in a small town, emphasising thus that setting alone cannot be a generic determinant of *film noir*.

The third film is Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past*, aka “Build My Gallows High”. The film relates the story of Jeff, the ill-fated *noir* protagonist played by Robert Mitchum, Kathie Moffett, the erotic *femme fatale*, vividly portrayed by Jane Greer, and

Whit Sterling, a moneyed racketeer played by Kirk Douglas. I will talk about their acting and performances in this film as they seem to build the characterisations that have developed into the standard for particular types in *film noir*: the fated man, the duplicitous *femme fatale*, and the wealthy and ruthless criminal boss. Simultaneously, the skill of blacklisted writer Daniel Mainwaring is brought forward to stress the way his screenplay of the film reads almost like a compilation of one-liners and which marks the verbal density and concision of *noir*.

I then discuss how the film uses different narrative and lighting techniques (chiefly low-key), since these are particularly relevant for analysing the symbols within this limited “colour spectrum” of greys and blacks and understanding their meaning. I make an attempt to identify and further explain the specific features of the *femme fatale* and I suggest that she be understood not just as a destructively attractive woman, but essentially as a symptom of male anxieties. I analyse the nature of female “emotional entrapment” portrayed by and in the women in *Out of the Past* from a semiotic angle. In the light of Hjelmslev’s theory, connotation is brought about whenever the relationship between the signifier and the signified becomes a new signifier for a second signified. In my own interpretation, this may imply that the represented object as well as what is expressed by the form of a picture can have a second, connotative meaning.

The flashback technique will be further approached, and this time I point out the modes and subversive uses of flashbacks in particular in this film, which explain the past that hovers over Jeff’s current life. Our attention is captured by the action taking place in a directly observable tangible reality (when Jeff is sitting by the lake with Ann relating his past to her). I make it clear however that in cinema the past, as such, does not exist, and that the fact that the viewer feels he or she is being transported back in time through the use of (extensive) flashbacks is indeed a present process as we know where we stand, and the events occurring before our eyes are the ones that happen “here and now”, as Jean Mitry emphasises in terms of the “subjective image”:

[This] is why some psychologists have felt justified in saying that the “vision of the past in the cinema does not correspond with an act of consciousness relating to remembered objects.” This is certainly true but a “backwards shift in time” when the hero has been seen to lapse into a gloomy daydream does not presume to present the daydream “in its subjective state.” What the character is *thinking* is not revealed, merely *what he is thinking about*. Once again we enclose an “interiority”

by taking it “from the outside.” The subjective image is quite different from this supposed representation of memory. (Mitry 1997:53)

The last film to be discussed is *The Big Combo* (1955) by Joseph H. Lewis. Unjustly forgotten by many film critics, this film is to me one of the finest of *noir*, with powerful symbolic elements, an impressive cast and some memorable dialogues. This time not only do I focus on visual symbols, but also on the use of double-entendres, by delimiting and detailing some individual scenes. Teamed with the renowned cinematographer John Alton, Lewis’s direction points up crude sexual innuendo throughout the film. I will explore the photographic images, the dialogues and encrypted symbols that place *The Big Combo*’s characters in a dark, insular universe of tacit repression and graphic violence. Some reference to Lewis’s previous film, *Gun Crazy* (1950), will also be made since there is a consistent stylisation of both films in terms of the rendering of violent crime and sexual excitement.

With regard to symbols, I start my analysis of the movie with the opening scene in which we see Susan Lowell (Jean Wallace) being chased by two hit men and trying to run away through tunnels in oblique shadows. These tunnels already represent the different tracks of a crazed pursuit that the main characters engage in, redolent of the maze that I referred to above. Susan actually uses the word herself in her first confession: “I live in a maze, Mr Diamond [Cornel Wilde]. A strange blind and blackened maze and all of the little twisting paths lead back to Mr Brown [Richard Conte].”

The other reason I selected this film is because it is very much imbued with the *noir* concerns of guilt and obsession, linked, however, with other (symbolic) “transgressions”, namely at the sexual level, featuring evidence of the changing times. In this respect, I want to challenge what James Naremore stated about the film: “the Lewis picture [*The Big Combo*], which was impressively photographed by John Alton, has subsequently acquired a cult reputation because of its skillful treatment of repressed, sadomasochistic relationships; nevertheless, it remains a studioish throwback to the kind of thing Hollywood was doing five years earlier, and it looked dated even when it was released” (Naremore 1998:156). I refute Naremore with a semiotic analysis of the symbols, showing that the themes of (homoerotic) love are of no false sentimentality, blended as they are with overt yet dissimulated sexuality and explicit violence. I present my argument in the light of what Foster Hirsch stated, when describing the gangster role in many films, but

specifically in *Touch of Evil*: “These characters are more dangerous, more anti-social, than the reasons the films tentatively offer to “explain” their pathological state; the spectacular and unclassifiable nature of their mania gives the films their strong impact – we feel the presence of characters whose evil is profound and beyond understanding” (Hirsch 1981:194). I endorse Hirsch’s position regarding the way that *The Big Combo* embraced a visual style that is more aggressive when compared to other earlier *noirs*. From *Double Indemnity* in 1944 to *The Big Combo* in 1955 *film noir* maintained a critique of mainstream affirmative film art in which political and social hostility is delivered in arresting aesthetic terms.

Part V is fused into two different sections and it globally consists of a synthesis of the overall considerations laid out previously, summing up the main variations and similarities found throughout the diverse phases or periods of *film noir*. I entitled section 1 “Genre Revisited” as it is devoted to the analysis of the concept with some thoughts about the most recent developments in genre study. Since the whole scholarly purpose of this thesis is to discuss *film noir* primarily from a stylistic perspective, I seek to provide a comprehensive overview of applied genre criticism, concentrating on mainstream American cinema, and explaining the history and social myths that may have helped with the expansion of film genres, like the Western or the gangster film, as both genres share a number of elements in common. I establish a relationship between genre and *auteur* (previously debated in Part III), concentrating on the origin and position of the term “genre” itself and the way the concept is applied in the definition of cinema as an entertainment mode in general.

“Towards an (Elusive) Definition of *Film Noir*” makes up section 2 and seeks to bring together the major elements that have given full body to this thesis: the cultural, literary, social, and political components on which *film noir* drew. Thus, I intend to show that *noir* persists in many forms and above all that it overlaps with many genres. Simultaneously I hope to be able to expand on the universality of *noir*, following Raymond Durgnat’s thesis that *noir* is potentially everywhere, and stress the pluralistic aspects these films embody. For that, I will have recourse to the opinions of several critics, notably Richard Maltby who conceives Hollywood productions (of which *noirs* are a part) to be marked as an erratic changeable cycle rather than as a stable arrangement of genres. Raymond Durgnat says that *film noir* “describes not genres but dominant cycles or motifs,

and many, if not most, films would come under two headings, since interbreeding is intrinsic to motif processes” (Durgnat 1970:51). Robert Porfirio sees it as “a series of historical frames or contexts”, but he adds that “(...) yet we must ground the term in some sort of adequate working definition if it is to warrant serious consideration as an object of either film or cultural history” (in Silver 1996:77).

Globally, my declared difference of opinion from some critics (who persist in referring to *film noir* as a film genre) is an attempt to generate debate but, unlike Robert Aldrich’s *noir Kiss Me Deadly*, this project is an endeavour to (re-)open Pandora’s box, and suggests just how wide the definition of the *noir* aesthetic might reasonably be. Apart from (but more important than) tracing the affiliations attached to *film noir*, I expect to establish the idea that *film noir* is the result of a many-sided interaction between developments within particular genres. With my analysis I want to support the notion that *noir* is a misleading term, and that the multicultural and social features, as well as the historical context in which these films prospered, are the issues worthy of investigation. As I said at the beginning, I am fully aware that consensus might never be reached regarding what *film noir* is. In the end, though, it is expected that this thesis will have shed some further light on the fundamental attributes of *film noir* and will have explicated a way to integrate *film noir* into the operations of cine-semiotics.

II. The Cinematic and Social Background to Film Noir

1 Cultural and Literary Influences on *Film Noir*

1.1 “Hard-boiled” Crime Fiction

*I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship at Butte. He also called a shirt a shoit. I didn't think anything of what he had done to the city's name. Later I heard men who couldn't manage their r's give it the same pronunciation. I still didn't see anything in it but the meaningless sort of humour that used to make richardsnary the thieves' word for dictionary. A few years later I went to Personville and learned better. (Hammett, *Red Harvest*, 1929)*

The literary origins of *film noir* are easily found by the majority of film critics in the hard-boiled or tough-guy school of fiction that proliferated in the early twenties with a range of names, from Ernest Hemingway to John O'Hara with his *Appointment in Samarra* (1934). When digging into the roots of this type of writing, one can go as far back as 1896 with Frank Munsey's *Argosy*, an adult magazine. He is the one credited with the idea of using cheap wood-pulp paper, which soon replacing the dime novel became the most mass-produced consumer magazine and reading material in America. However, true hard-boiled fiction only developed through the twenties and during the severe Depression years, a time when magazines, commonly referred to as pulps, were flourishing.

1.1.1 Dashiell Hammett

In 1929, Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961) broke onto the scene with his first novel featuring the nameless detective employed by the “Continental Detective Agency”, in San Francisco, and hence called “The Continental Op”. In this novel, the hero is a private eye who goes to “Poisonville”, a mining town called Butte in Montana, which is distinctively described as “an ugly city of forty thousand, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains”. Newspaper editor Donald Willson has been killed, and the Op is hired by his father, Old Elihu Willson, a mining and newspaper czar, to find the murderer and to clean up the town. The Op begins to work on the murder case and in exchange he is promised ten thousand dollars. He eventually solves Donald’s murder and then Old Elihu breaks his promise on the deal. The Op though forces him not to do it.

Hammett is usually considered to be the creator of this hard-boiled tradition with various novels and short stories. Although *Red Harvest* is not remarkable in terms of its plot or plausibility, it represents a critical division between the older dime novelists and a new description of American society that is fraudulent and alienated. The Continental Op is normally described as an unscrupulous character, who acts in a cunning manner when exercising his profession. Even morally speaking, he very often finds it difficult to decide on whether he should denounce a co-worker detective for a crime he has committed (even if that means putting the reputation of his agency at risk).

The first cheap magazine devoted to crime fiction was the *Detective Story Magazine* established by 1915. Amongst the dozens of magazines of this kind, probably the best known and the most influential was *Black Mask* (fig. 1), founded in 1920 by Henry L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan. The magazine existed for a long period of time (1920-1951) and soon became associated with a style of writing that strongly changed the image of detective fiction. Originally publishing any type of adventure story, *Black Mask*, which was a purely commercial project, ended up concentrating solely on crime and detective stories exclusively.

Two years before the magazine appeared, the founders of *Black Mask* had already set up another leading literary magazine called *The Smart Set*, calling itself a “magazine of cleverness”, and reputed to be the most sophisticated “little magazine” in America. It was

in fact seen as a good opportunity for writers just getting started in their careers, as well as for established authors whose more daring efforts could find no other market. There again, the authors of *The Smart Set*, whose motto was “one civilized reader is worth a thousand boneheads”, showed a strong desire to upset and condemn the American naivety and Puritanism. To achieve their goal, they would write their texts using sarcasm and derision, but always aiming at a stern commitment to high culture and the avant-garde. Most importantly, *The Smart Set*, which also featured the work of James Joyce and other leading modernist authors, introduced readers to the writers, literary trends, and critical ideas which would be relevant for the development of American modernism.

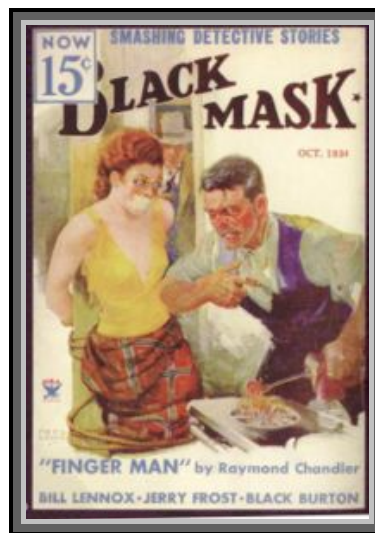


Figure 1. ***Black Mask* (October 1934)**

Realising that *The Smart Set* was not financially viable, Mencken and Nathan created two other pulps, *Parisienne* and *Saucy Stories*, which were both profitable and would make up for the failure of other ventures. Both titles would contain texts of literary criticism, humorous articles, and above all a strong sceptical spirit about human progress, deriving from Mencken’s point of view and expressed in his penetrating style. His political texts started to be more and more insightful and sharp, which made him an influential writer and rapidly get fame all over the country.

For the purpose of this work, it is precisely this style that is relevant here, since “for both the writers and their protagonists, “hard-boiled” was first and foremost a matter of style. It was a stance, a way of observing and behaving that demanded the suppression of any openly expressed feeling. Hard-boiled toughness was indicated by the characters’

tough appearance, by their occupation, by personal habits, and by a manner of speech” (Hirsch 1981:24), normally using understated vernacular idioms, all linked with graphic violence. This style began to develop as a popular form in the outcome of the devastation of the First World War, and all these thrillers are stories that can be seen as very directly associated with the socioeconomic circumstances of that time. Therefore, the reader would easily identify in these characteristic narratives the harrowing events of a social life which permanently accentuated the difficult conditions of American people. The characters of these stories would then represent both sides of the same coin: on the one hand, the acknowledgment that life has to follow its natural (social) path and, on the other, a depiction of a character’s existence which is morally confused and subject to arbitrariness and complete dislocation.

Hammett became not only the most famous writer at *Black Mask* but also a controlling influence on it. Along with other writers, known as “the boys in the back room” or “the poets of the tabloid murder,” as Edmund Wilson (one of Hammett’s supporters and pioneers of American literary modernism) would refer to them, Hammett’s hero would use terse and laconic speech, with a rhythm that would demonstrate Hammett’s ability to create a distinctive voice. Hirsch sums up the style that was used in the *Black Mask*:

Colloquial, racy, vivid, *Black Mask* style (like that later to dominate *film noir*) imitated the lingo of the real criminal world. Style and form are so well matched that it is surprising that crime stories had not always been written in this way, in the accent of street-wise hoodlums and burly cops and gumshoes; but the fact is that *Black Mask*’s gritty realism was something new in the field – a conscious rebellion against the sissified English murder mysteries. (Hirsch 1981:26)

This type of crime fiction, then, used an instantly identifiable iconic figure as the hard-boiled investigator. In Hammett’s fiction the figure is either the anonymous “The Continental Op”, mentioned above, or the self-employed gumshoe Sam Spade. As Hirsch points out, the private eye moves about in the criminal underworld and the basic narrative patterns show him as a lone investigator against brutal criminals, often connected with a wider corrupt power structure. Normally spoken in the first-person, these stories would portray a solitary, cynical city-dweller whose objective is to restore a never-achievable order and set all to rights.

Again, Hammett’s style and substance expressed in these revolutionary mystery stories have to be understood as a reflection of the major cultural and social transformation

that America was undergoing at that time. In hard-boiled writing, the city is corrupt, disorientating and menacing, frequently depicted as a dark and confusing labyrinth. And that can be seen through the characters who in one way or another echo the feeling of disenchantment in the years between the wars which was exacerbated even further by political and economic adversities. Criminality involving unlawful connections between business and politics were increasingly evident in American cities, following the Volstead Act of 1919 or the 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression. This apprehensive sense of fatality manifested in the hard-boiled fiction of this period is typically associated with distrust that the lives of people can get any better under current economic and socio-political circumstances and that they cannot but resort to a life of crime and marginality.

In 1926, the editorship of *Black Mask* was assumed by Captain Joseph T. Shaw, who made it one of the most respected of the pulp magazines. In fact, the identity of the magazine, which Shaw would never refer to as “pulp” but always as “the book” or the “rough paper” magazine, became even more sharply defined. He would encourage other writers to follow Hammett’s style in espousing a high pattern of colloquial, terse writing, favouring, as he wrote, “economy of expression” and “authenticity in character and action”, all of which are important features of the hard-boiled style. These features, moreover, made hard-boiled writing a totally different category of crime fiction, as Andrew Spicer notes, making it a more sophisticated, middle-class “English school” of detective fiction, which included major names from the mystery fields such as Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie or Dorothy L. Sayers. Unlike the stories of Sherlock Holmes, for instance, in which the whodunit (the most widespread subgenre of the detective novel) is the most important element of detection, or the stories of Christie which take place in confined settings (like trains or country houses), the hard-boiled school intentionally challenged this type of mystery / detective story, proposing instead a detective or a private eye, who works individually in an urban society which conceals money and liaisons, power and sex, crime and corruption. Whereas most of the English murder stories, “whose tough-sounding mysteries were intended as a challenge to the genteel, formula-ridden puzzle stories of the British crime school” (Hirsch 1981:29), depicted characters of a typically professional and upper class milieu, the urban American crime stories would be totally different, focussing not on sober detectives but on gangsters and other victims of crime.

Apart from “The Continental Op” represented in *Red Harvest*, Dashiell Hammett, under the pseudonym Peter Collinson, also created other enduring characters, namely Nick and Nora Charles (from *The Thin Man*) or the even more popular Sam Spade, the leading character in the novel and several film adaptations of *The Maltese Falcon*. Sam Spade, who is most directly associated with the quintessential *noir* actor Humphrey Bogart, turned out to be the model detective-hero. Again, Spade and other American hard-boiled heroes provided an alternative to and a break from the conventional detective hero that dominated in murder mystery novels and films throughout the silent era and into the thirties. Both in the novel and in John Huston’s film, Spade appears sometimes as a hard or even an egoistical competitor, and comes across as being as amoral as the criminals he defeats. On the whole, Sam Spade is a pitiless hero, showing no grief at all, for instance, when he learns that his partner has been cruelly killed or even when he refuses to inspect the body and get some clues to the identity of the murderer. His lack of affect is accentuated further when, the day after the murder, he orders his secretary to have Archer’s name removed from the office premises (doors, windows and his desk as well).

However, we then see the other side of Spade’s personality, one that shows signs of heroism, revealing devotion, professional conscientiousness, and honesty. I too believe that what seems to be the compromised code of the detective character is actually symptomatic of Hammett’s higher honesty. By adopting this simple code personified in Spade as his highest ideal, it is his first and only line of defence (which became Hammett’s famous quote) against an intimidating world: “Listen, when a man’s partner’s killed, he’s supposed to do something about it. It doesn’t make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you’re supposed to do something about it”, he says to Brigid O’Shaughnessy (Mary Astor), turning her in after she confesses that she had killed Archer.

This philosophy also marked Hammett’s integrity when he was questioned about his communist contacts, as he simply refused to reveal them. In several passages, as in this one, which reiterates the moral foundation of the hard-boiled code, one can see that Hammett’s language was hard-bitten, like crime journalism, leaving the readers to make their own judgements. *The Maltese Falcon* is in this sense a good example of the objective style, and again as readers, we build up our own impressions of what goes on inside Spade’s mind, often misreading the ways he acts as in the example above. There are other

passages which clearly show how Hammett developed this, making stylistic elisions part of the whole mystery that embodies character, ultimately what goes on in Spade's mind:

A telephone bell rang in darkness. When it had rung three times bedsprings creaked, fingers fumbled on wood, something small and hard thudded on a carpeted floor, the springs creaked again, and a man's voice said:
"Hello.... Yes, speaking.... Dead?"

Our attention is much more focussed on the actions and objects, as we get no information whatsoever about the way Spade has reacted to his partner's death. We are the ones (consciously or not) outlining the character's subjectivity, and making the connections between the actions, objects, and the character's feelings and attitudes. This style was soon brought into other *noir* productions, by virtue of the professional ability of film directors and cinematographers to use the appropriate lighting, as I show later. An illustration that reveals the state of mind of the main character / protagonist through elision is the moment when Spade is rolling his cigarette on learning about Archer's murder:

Spade's thick fingers made a cigarette with deliberate care, sifting a measured quantity of tan flakes down into curved paper, spreading the flakes so that they lay equal at the ends with a slight depression in the middle, thumbs rolling the paper's inner edge down and up under the other edge as forefingers pressed it over, thumbs and fingers sliding to the paper cylinder's ends to hold it even while tongue licked the flap, left forefinger and thumb pinching their end while right forefinger and thumb smoothed the damp seam, right forefinger and thumb twisting their end and lifting the other to Spade's mouth. (Hammett 1992:10-11)

This long caricature-like sentence serves the purpose of omitting any clear and direct reference to Spade's feelings, but through contextual reading or watching this elaborate process typical of mechanisation, one gets to know Hammett's narrative style (more in terms of an illusion of objectivity), at a metonymic level, in which Spade's motives and feelings are usually kept unknown to us, like something mechanised.

The Maltese Falcon was made into movies in 1931, when it was retitled *Dangerous Lady*; in 1936, the new version was entitled *Satan Met a Lady*; and again in 1941, which is the one John Huston adapted and directed and which has become a classic of modern popular American culture. In Huston's writing and Bogart's performance we find the emerging *noir* elements of the film as these two brought the hard-boiled detective to the screen. Some critics have actually highlighted the textbook camerawork as deeply

unsettling when for example shooting Sydney Greenstreet (Kasper Gutman) from low angles to emphasise his massiveness (fig. 2). In the scene below, the major characters are all around the precious bird, and in balanced, low-contrast lighting, the four protagonists are filmed in a diminuendo, with Gutman appearing from a low viewpoint accentuating his bulk. I should also add that the film's major resources are its brittle dialogues and the performances of (essentially) its male characters, with references or allusions to their mannerisms or the homosexual suggestiveness in their behaviour, as in the case of Cairo and his infatuation with Wilmer (Elisha Cook, Jr.). This issue will be mentioned again in particular in Part *III*.



Figure 2. *The Maltese Falcon*

Another Hammett novel, which some consider to be his best book, *The Glass Key*, became a movie in 1935 (with George Raft in the role of Ed Beaumont) and again in 1942. This latter version is for me the best adaptation of a Hammett story, though one could argue that the film lacks the ending of the original novel, which is a more hard-boiled version, especially in its love triangle story. Here, the character of Ed Beaumont is played by Alan Ladd, whose devotion to crooked political boss, Paul Madvig (Brian Donlevy), takes him into the murder investigation of Senator Henry's (Moroni Olsen) son. This time, the happy ending in which Paul watches with a smile on his face Ed and Janet Henry (Veronica Lake) departing together is not a *noir* feature, but rather a typical saturnine Hollywood ending. It is this examination of the filthy underworld of apparently respectable

institutions and their corrupting influence that mark *The Glass Key* out as a *noir* film. The savage and unrelenting beating handed out to Beaumont is uncomfortable to watch (fig. 3). Ed's behaviour is highly ambivalent, suggesting a latent homosexuality, or at very least a masochistic attachment, which is also emphasised in his relationship with Jeff, who enjoys beating him nearly to death.



Figure 3. *The Glass Key*

In addition to the significant influence his novels and stories have had on film in general, and *film noir* in particular, Dashiell Hammett is still regarded today as being the founding father of the hard-boiled school and one of the greatest American crime writers of his time. His success was applauded both in America and in France. In fact, Nino Frank opened his review of the film in *L'Écran Français* (August 7, 1946) in this way: "I will not insult my reader by telling him who Dashiell Hammett is: a private detective become writer. The few books (novels or stories) that he had published before Hollywood made use of his services were enough to establish his mastery" (in Luhr 1995:130).

1.1.2 Raymond Chandler

Raymond Chandler (1888-1959), who also wrote crime stories for *Black Mask*, had a less cynical type of writing but he is also known as one of the greatest representatives and masters of the hard-boiled school of crime fiction. Born in Chicago, he grew up in England, where he attended Dulwich College, and obtained a fine classical education. Returning to America as an adult, Chandler first came to write detective stories in 1932 with *Blackmailers Don't Shoot*, which was published in *Black Mask* one year later. Contrasting with most of his pulp-writing colleagues, Chandler tried to increase the limits of the pulp formulas in more determined and caring directions. In his first novel, *The Big Sleep* (1939), Chandler introduces a detective, Philip Marlowe, who, when compared to Sam Spade, is both more sophisticated and more respectable. Indeed, when the work was submitted for opinions from critics, American reviewers would say that his name echoed English sources, insinuating elegance and sophistication. When creating Marlowe as a new private eye, a proper *noir* hero, Chandler, it seems, was the first to come up with a sort of “code of ethics” for private detective plots. In his opinion, a private detective must be above all the things, or, as he says, “the best man in his world”:

But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things. He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man, or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks, that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness. The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. If there were enough like him, I think the world would be a very safe place to live in, and yet not too dull to be worth living in. (Chandler 1995:991)

In this definition of the ideal detective, Chandler's hero, as I have noted, is directed by his own code, morally flexible but not corruptible, preserving his integrity while resorting, if necessary, to violent behaviour and double-dealing. Marlowe may seem just a fallen idealist, capable of being physically worn out or romantically duped, but he is neither "mean", "tarnished, nor afraid". Chandler's hero, whether he was called Dalmas, Mallory, Carmady, or Marlowe, has much the same tough-guy posture as Hammett's the Continental Op and Sam Spade, and like Spade and the others, he too is sexually ambiguous, in the sense that beautiful women come on to him and find him appealing, but he remains sexually unapproachable. However, Marlowe is not a conventional "tough guy", but rather a multifaceted (and occasionally sentimental) figure who speaks Spanish. He appears to understand something about classical music and, somewhat against the norms of his profession, normally refuses money from clients if his ethical requirements are not met.

All of Chandler's novels have been adapted for film. The most notable one is his seminal work of hard-boiled fiction, *The Big Sleep* (1946), directed by Howard Hawks, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Chandler discussed the plot with other screenwriters, namely Leigh Brackett, William Faulkner and Jules Furthman, and even wrote a new ending which was not used: "This one similarly had Marlowe and Carmen [Carmen Sternwood, played by Martha Vickers] in Geiger's house, with Marlowe, but not Carmen, realizing that the first person to walk out the door would be gunned down. Disliking the role of "playing God" with Carmen's life, he decides to flip a coin to decide if he should tell her. He does not, but is about to stop her when she pulls a gun, ready to shoot him. As she opens the door, machine-gun fire tears her to pieces" (in McCarthy 2000:379).

Warner Bros. feared that the plot involving a pornography racket, the homosexual relationship between Lundgren and Geiger, Carmen's nymphomania, police corruption and allusions to drug use, among others, would actually be turned down by the censors. The plot indeed is very complex and not easy to follow at times (it is said that Chandler himself would not know the answer to several situations or the causes behind certain events), with many characters all double-crossing or betraying one another, so much so that even the screenwriters were forced to consult Raymond Chandler for advice. The film evokes



Figure 4. *The Big Sleep*

the chaotic underworld of the novel through setting and visualisation rather than narrative drive. Despite the complexities of narrative, the core of the film is in the world the story depicts and the movements of Marlowe within it. Furthermore, the novel also presents a skilful description of setting, as Chandler was very keen on describing vivid and squalid locations. Marlowe's untidy office is depicted as having "venerable magazines" and "net curtains that needed laundering", or the Fulwider building's vacant offices, for example, as "one gilt elevator" and "tarnished and well-missed spittoon on a gnawed rubber mat".

In sharp contrast to these low places is the elegant Sternwood mansion (fig. 4) in the Hollywood foothills, where the family "could no longer smell the stale sump water or the oil, but they could still look out their front windows and see what had made them rich. If they wanted to." Again, *The Big Sleep* stresses characterisation and visual style rather than events, through carefully controlled descriptions. Chandler's characterisation of Marlowe shows a complex and hesitant central figure, and the fact that he is presented to us through first person narration enables us to develop an instant bond with this character, sometimes even as a sidekick figure when he makes his way through the murky world of crime.

Moreover, from the visual point of view, although the film cinematography does not strive to create striking patterns, it presents some relevant elements of *noir*: the *femme fatale*'s glamour and her insinuating silhouette, the dark compositions of the opening

sequences and the several cynical exchanges of dialogue, the rain and mist as if to underline the evil and oppression that exist in this world, the games of light and shadow inherited – as we will see later – from German Expressionism, the guns and trench coats, and so forth.

The use of language and tone both in the novel and in the film are also very significant. In the form, the tone, the rhythm, and the tension that the protagonists give to the film, like for instance, the disdain and provocation that exist between Marlowe and Vivian Sternwood (Lauren Bacall) or the irony and rudeness between Marlowe and his antagonists. In terms of content, the constant verbal sparring lead the characters either to seduction or to aggression. Towards the end of the film, when order seems to be established, Vivian observes: “You’ve forgotten one thing... me!” The camera zooms in on both Bogart and Bacall. He asks her in a very cool way: “What’s wrong with you?” And between the lines, she says: “Nothing you can’t fix”.

If Hammett wrote about a world he knew (among his various jobs, the work of a Pinkerton investigator enriched his stock of experiences) in a tight and vernacular style that seemed to him the appropriate medium for his embittered characters, plots and settings, Chandler was not so contemptuous in his style. For the former, his writing style evokes an entire mood, using action to propel the story, or as Chandler once wrote:

Hammett wrote (...) for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street. Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse. (...) He put these people down on paper as they were, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes. (Chandler 1995:66)

For the latter, the way the story is told is often more important than what the story is about. After all, as Chandler once wrote in a letter to the editor of a magazine, “The most durable thing in writing is style, and style is the most valuable investment a writer can make with his time (...)” (in Gardiner & Walker 1962:75), and his style, together with Hemingway’s, is still very much imitated when it comes to detective or hard-boiled crime stories. Chandler’s dramatic writing attracted the attention of Hollywood filmmakers and in 1943 he went to work as a scriptwriter for Paramount. He then worked on films which have attained classic status today, such as *Double Indemnity*, *The Blue Dahlia*, and *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Also, in 1947, Chandler saw his *Lady in the Lake* being

released to the big screen by MGM with director / star Robert Montgomery as the serious Philip Marlowe of the story. The plot unfolds from Montgomery's point of view in an attempt to replicate Chandler's first-person narrative style (Montgomery performs his entire role in voiceover). The lead character is only seen on-screen from a subjective perspective, that is, through reflections in mirrors and windows, and as the narrator, he speaks directly to the audience (fig. 5). This created a rarity in techniques of film representation and it is still considered one of the most revolutionary styles of filmmaking since the introduction of the talkies.



Figure 5. *Lady in the Lake*

One of the archetypical *noir* films is Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), the original release title of Chandler's novel, *Farewell, My Lovely*. In fact, the film opens with a masterly moment in *film noir* when over a disorienting shot of an obtrusive ceiling light voices level accusations of murder at someone. Sitting with bandaged eyes, we soon meet Philip Marlowe (Dick Powell), as the camera comes down to his face. A policeman is by his side, next to a small table in an old room, where the questioning is going on (see fig. 111 on p. 378). As spectators, we too feel unsettled by the first scenes, thanks to the camera movements, showing different angles at the same time (from the

flashing lights outside with their neon to the reflection of Marlowe's face), using low-key and high-contrast techniques to make it clear to us that we live in a troubled and gloomy world beyond control. Director Dmytryk, along with the screenwriter, John Paxton, transformed Chandler's work into a film which has strong *noir* elements, specifically with the representation of Claire Trevor (Velma / Mrs Grayle), as a conniving, evil woman, and Dick Powell's hard-boiled toughness. *Murder, My Sweet* follows the hard-boiled tradition and a form of Expressionism transmitted through Marlowe's character, when, for example, totally drugged, he starts dreaming of images that seem to be unreal, creating an atmosphere of fear and dislocation. The film develops then within a closed system using two recurring devices of *film noir*: the flashback and the voiceover narration.

In hard-boiled writing, the city appears as a central symbol, one of the most recurrent elements in *noir*. It materializes into a human trap, leading to the self-destruction of the characters, exploring the darkness within the human spirit, and luring them ever deeper into the worst psychotic enthrallments. In both Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* and Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles respectively are corrupt and disorientating for both male protagonists, making them their victims, as Nicholas Christopher points out. In fact, he establishes a parallelism between the city, tinged with suspicion and absurdity, and a ruthless maze which the *noir* hero (haplessly) tries to find his way out of:

The labyrinth in the film noir – the city-as-world – is made to appear implacable and unassailable, and the hero puny and vulnerable. The one, all stone and steel, will endure; the other will play out a short, transient role among millions of others as insignificant and interchangeable as he, and then disappear. For a brief interlude, he will be like a free-floating electron off the great mass of men. The hero of a film noir is not the hero as we find him elsewhere in film. Heroic he may appear on occasion, even recklessly so, and brave, and sympathetic despite his deep flaws, but he comes into sharpest focus on one of those rain-washed, shadowy, starkly lit streets that is the *terra cognita* of the film noir, I see him (and have always identified with him) for what he really is: a victim. (Christopher 1997:32)

Chandler is rightly regarded as one of the best writers about Los Angeles. Through the eyes of Philip Marlowe, the reader can see and enjoy the streets and hill sides of this city, which is sometimes described very vividly, and at the same time showing its aspects of decadence and material corruption. Some critics, namely James Naremore, have pointed out that a novel such as *The Big Sleep* every so often brings to mind T. S. Eliot's darkest,

most fastidious visions of London in “The Waste Land” published in 1922. As I have noted above, Chandler had created a very personal style, developed from his own sensibility, and a richness of vocabulary and aesthetics during his time spent in England. Naremore notices that all of Chandler’s “novels depend upon the narrative voice of Marlowe - who is a synthesis of tough guy and cultural aristocrat, who views Los Angeles almost like a visitor from abroad. As Jacques Barzun observes, even Marlowe’s name connotes ‘Englishness, Elegance, and Establishment’” (Naremore 1998:85).

After Hammett and Chandler, James M. Cain and Horace McCoy were the most influential pulp writers. Differences in style are however to be found between these two sets of leading writers of the hard-boiled school. Cain’s most famous stories include criminals that serve as narrators and as readers we know right from the start “who done it” and the reasons why the criminal felt compelled to commit that crime. This type of first-person narration will in fact have a major influence on *noir* style, and as the story progresses the suspense grows not around the investigation of who the culprit is but rather in scrutinizing who he *really* is, as if the reader is allowed to pierce through his consciousness as the story unfolds.

1.1.3 James M. Cain

James M. Cain (1892-1977) reveals that he never felt that he belonged to a particular school or tradition:

I make no conscious effort to be tough, or hard-boiled, or grim, or any of the things I am usually called. I merely try to write as the character would write, and I never forget that the average man, from the fields, the streets, the bars, the offices and even the gutters of his country, has acquired a vividness of speech that goes beyond anything I could invent, and that if I stick to this heritage, this logo of the American countryside, I shall attain a maximum of effectiveness with very little effort. (Preface to *Double Indemnity* in Cain 1989b:1)

This “vividness of speech” is one of the characteristics of Cain’s writing style. Just like Hammett or Chandler, he writes about crime in a stylistically self-conscious manner, creating characters who use a strong vernacular mode, who are very often self-destructive or used and betrayed by strong women. The threat of the *femme fatale* is one of the basic formulas pervading his work, with sexually enticing women who are embodiments of male sexual fantasies, and in meeting them and beginning affairs with them these men enact what Cain has called “the wish come true”.

It is not too difficult to understand why Chandler disliked Cain’s sour and mordant writing: “James Cain- faugh! Everything he touches smells like a billygoat. He is every kind of writer I detest, a *faux naïf*, a Proust in greasy overalls, a dirty little boy with a piece of chalk and a board fence and nobody looking. Such people are the offal of literature, not because they write about dirty things, but because they do it in a dirty way.” This note was written – unfairly, in my opinion - by Raymond Chandler to his publisher. Curiously enough, Chandler would, a few years later along with its director Billy Wilder, be responsible for the screenplay of *Double Indemnity*, from Cain’s novel.

The way Cain’s characters move about in his novels, in a highly sexual and psychologically explosive manner, shows an original approach to his characters, through their own words, from the point of view of those who committed the crimes (very often the narrators themselves were the criminals), rather than being observed by a moralistic and sexually restrained investigator, for example. His protagonists are often victims of the Depression, people who due to adverse circumstances were forced to leave their

hometowns and move into bigger cities, like Los Angeles, and ending up forced into the world of crime or turning to violence. To some critics, like Edmund Wilson, Cain was the central figure of the “poets of tabloid murder”; he writes that “Cain himself is particularly ingenious in tracing from their first beginnings the tangles that gradually tighten around the necks of the people involved in those bizarre and brutal crimes that figure in the American papers” (Wilson 1962:21).

Cain’s stories - in which normally a man falls for a woman (the already-mentioned *femme fatale*) and becomes involved in a crime with her and is eventually betrayed by her – relate to the manner illicit sex is in fact a trap leading quickly to crime as the new lovers plan to murder the woman’s inconvenient husband. *Double Indemnity* served as the basis for one of the most talismanic *films noirs*. Sex and lust, greed and murder, the first-person narration, the recurrent flashbacks are all elements that anticipate other important *films noirs* such as *Out of the Past*, *The Killers*, and *Criss Cross*. However, film adaptation of Cain’s novels followed a different pattern. One has to remember that *Double Indemnity*, for example, was screenwritten by Chandler, and both he and director Wilder raised the level of the whole social context, making the sex scenes less evident, and also making sure that the dialogues were not so blunt. William Robertson also underlines these differences in the film adaptation:

Cain was many things (...). He relied on his rhythmic sense of dialogue and his understanding of human psychology and social context to tell his tales. So it was that when *film noir* took on the job of adapting Cain’s novels, the distinctly 1930s aspects were removed from his yarns of sex and murder, and manipulative, castrating temptresses. The result was that Cain’s strong but flawed women lost whatever motivating traits they exhibited in the books and became pointlessly manipulative. (...) It’s important, and only fair, to remember the distinction between the literary demands of the 1930s and the cinematic demands of the 1940s. (...) If nothing else, Cain deserves to be taken seriously for his legitimate contribution to American literature. (Robertson 2001:27)

Double Indemnity, filmed in 1944, became Billy Wilder’s first and truest *film noir*. The plot is very simple: insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) is tempted by the attractive Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), the wife of his client, into cooking up a brilliant scheme to murder her husband and collect on his accident insurance policy, with a double indemnity clause.



Figure 6. *Double Indemnity*

All does not go to plan, and once the crime is committed, the cunning claims investigator Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson) is suspicious of the apparent accident and an investigation starts with Keyes paying regular visits to Neff's apartment (fig. 6). The film ends with Phyllis and Walter shooting at each other. Mortally wounded, Neff makes his way to his insurance office and records a confession, when he is found by Keyes. Claiming he will escape to Mexico, Neff falls down before reaching the office lift. This was the ending director Billy Wilder eventually decided on, although he had shot a completely different, drearier version in which Keyes watched Walter go to the gas chamber. One can say that neither was capable of rendering the Gothic horror of the ending of James M. Cain's novel, in which Keyes allows the couple to escape on a boat and make their way to South America, but they soon realise they have no way out. Facing this, Phyllis suggests that they will jump overboard, mindful that a shark is circling the boat.

After all, the plot, as I said, is undemanding, probably because as James M. Cain puts it:

The novels I write are honest and plausible. A lot of people come up to me and say, 'I enjoyed your last murder mystery very much.' Now, I've never written a murder mystery in my life. Some of the characters in my novels commit murder, but there's no mystery involved in them. They do it for sex or money or both. Take *Double Indemnity*. There's nothing mysterious about that. As a matter of fact, it is so clear and lucid that the insurance companies are now using it as a text. They're having their agents read it and they're distributing copies of it to some of their clients, just to let them know how thorough their claim department is. I think

Double Indemnity started the trend toward the production of fast-paced, hard-boiled, life-like pictures (...). (in Shearer 1945:11)

Still on the subject of style, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) is said to have inspired Albert Camus' existential novel *The Outsider*. The 1934 novel was a success upon its publication, mostly thanks to the fact that Cain knew how to reach the primary impulses of greed and sex, using protagonists who were led to crime through animalistic passion, pared down to crucial phrases with clipped, almost vicious simplicity. John Garfield plays the role of a drifter, Frank Chambers, who arrives at a small California roadside café and feels a strong attraction to Cora Smith (Lana Turner), an eye-catching young woman, married to the middle-aged owner of the restaurant, Nick Smith (Cecil Kellaway).

The prose in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* novel is incredibly fast, from the moment Frank sets eyes on Cora, working perhaps even faster than narrative in the movie itself. As Jessica Morrell points out, "the speed of the scene, aided by pared-down language and spare details, also makes the reader tense" (Morrell 2006:248), thus contributing to an uncomfortable situation:

Then I saw her. She had been out back, in the kitchen, but she came in to gather up my dishes. Except for the shape, she really wasn't any raving beauty, but she had a sulky look to her, and her lips stuck out in a way that made me want to mash them in for her. (Cain 1989c:8)

In a matter of a few pages, the dialogue becomes terse, hard-boiled, to the point that when their relationship erupts with Cora's sexual advances, when she implores him to "Bite me! Bite me!", the text reads:

I bit her. I sunk my teeth into her lips so deep I could feel the blood spurt into my mouth. It was running down her neck when I carried her upstairs. (Cain 1989c:11)

The film does not project this type of dialogue, and certainly not scenes of such content (for censorship reasons). I refer the reader to Appendix II "The Motion Picture Production Code", where on page 472, it reads: "Scenes of passion must be treated with an honest acknowledgement of human nature and its normal reactions". The untamed nature of the sex in *The Postman* was indeed considered too contentious, and Cain's strength in depicting the characters' basic impulses had to be "contained" in the film version. The expression used by Frank in the novel, "she really wasn't any raving beauty", was

subverted to make up for any censorial cuts. In fact, the phrase could not have been more misleading when Lana Turner first appears all dressed in white (shorts, blouse, and a turban wrapped around her blonde locks). A few pages later, both lovers hatch the plot of murdering Cora's husband. Their initial attempts do not succeed, but eventually, on a trip to Santa Barbara, the murder is committed when Frank hits Nick's head with an empty glass bottle (fig. 7). Tay Garnett's direction highlights the paradox that exists in the characters' lives, lending it a surreal quality, as in the sequence below when Frank misses his hit the first time.



Figure 7. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

Through these two films, *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, James M. Cain managed to set up a model for many screenwriters in the forties and fifties. His explicit tales of murder, greed and lust concerned everyday people, as Geoffrey O'Brien states:

Cain was another chronicler of the gratuitousness of fate, in the sexual rather than the criminal sphere – but for Cain the two spheres are rarely far apart. (...) In the typical Cain story someone opens a door at random (and in the first paragraph) and his destiny is sealed then and there. Generally it is not long before he realizes what

has happened, but, as if hypnotized, he does nothing to alter the course of events. (...) His best novels are in full gear from the first word and drive forward without a pause for breath until the final inevitable moment - the point where they click off neatly, leaving you with the void. (O'Brien 1997:69)

Cain's novels are indeed "in full gear from the first word", as O'Brien observes, and this can also be seen in his other novel, *Mildred Pierce*, which was adapted into a film by Warner Brothers in 1945. The movie stars Joan Crawford as the title character and is almost entirely told in flashback, following the *noir* tradition. It opens with Mildred's attempted suicide; disturbed in the attempt by a passing policeman (fig. 8), and entangled in a complex murder case, Mildred is brought in for police questioning and tells her tortuous story to a homicide detective. As her story begins, we hear gunshots and



Figure 8. *Mildred Pierce*

Monte Beragon (Zachary Scott), her second husband, calling the name "Mildred" as he crashes to his death in his beachfront home. Mildred is the hard-working, devoted mother of two, the spoiled-rotten, detestable teenager Veda (Ann Blyth, in a role that typed her for life), and Kay (Jo Marlowe), a lively ten-year-old, who suddenly dies of pneumonia. Mildred's children represent everything to her and, after her daughter's death, she

intensifies all her efforts, even sacrifices herself, so that Veda can get have everything she has always desired.

This Cain novel is intriguing and well-structured with a twist at the end, and demands a particular reading of gender issues inherent in classic American *film noir*. Unusually for *noir* films, the main protagonist of *Mildred Pierce* is female, but classically she is nearly destroyed by a *femme fatale* – her own daughter. The film tries to re-establish masculine authority (one should not ignore that, when the film was released in 1945, the American troops were coming back home from the war) after a time when women were economically emancipated and running many of the businesses in the country. Many consider, as I do, that the novel manages to be more sinister (and more convoluted) than the film, and this is also made evident by the type of direct, tough-minded language Cain uses and the power of his writing.

This is perhaps the reason why James M. Cain was nicknamed the leader of the “poets of tabloid murder” by critics, notably Edmund Wilson, who noted that “Cain himself is particularly ingenious in tracing from their first beginnings the tangles that gradually tighten around the necks of the people involved in those bizarre and brutal crimes that figure in the American papers” (Wilson 1962:21). Yet, Cain’s writing style shows a different attitude towards life when compared to the other hard-boiled writers. For one thing, Cain has always disagreed that such a school of writing existed and therefore did not consider himself a hard-boiled writer.

Also, unlike Hammett, Chandler and Woolrich, Cain did not expand his crime writing style in the pulp magazines. The characters he created were not persistently tough, self-assured private detectives, such as Hammett’s Sam Spade or Chandler’s Philip Marlowe. He rather employed marginal characters that moved about in Los Angeles always in search of fame and fortune. The narrator of *The Postman*, Frank Chambers, starts the novel by saying that “They threw me off the hay truck about noon” so the reader immediately learns that he is a drifter who has been tossed off a vehicle, only to find out later that he has arrived at Twin Oaks Tavern, a roadside café, and is being served a huge breakfast he cannot pay for. So the self-assuredness found in the other hard-boiled writers is replaced by malevolence and a certain stupidity in Cain’s marginal characters. In short, both novels - *Double Indemnity*, and more specifically, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* – expose Cain’s penchant for tales of murderous attraction. His characters are often self-

destructive, or used by stronger women, as is the case in *Mildred Pierce* in which the film also uses an act of murder to frame and give form to a plot that is concerned with issues that lie outside the conventional *noir* territory, the proper expectations of the independent women.

1.1.4 Horace McCoy

Horace McCoy (1897-1955) was another American mystery writer whose hard-boiled novels took place in the time of the Great Depression. His best-known novel is *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, first published in 1935, which was made into a movie of the same name in 1969, directed by Sydney Pollack. Charlie Chaplin soon showed a specific interest for the novel and decided to acquire its film rights. In France, his work was praised as a breakthrough existentialist novel by Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Gloria (Jane Fonda, in the film version) appears to be the “existentialist hero” and her personal choices always bring a concluding touch: “It’s peculiar to me that everybody pays so much attention to living and so little to dying. Why are these high-powered scientists always screwing around trying to prolong life instead of finding pleasant ways to end it?”. The novel fits well into the *roman noir* tradition, although it is not about the world of criminality and private detectives. The mood has rich sociological and historical overtones, namely those related to the depths of the Great Depression. The marathon dance contest is the metaphor that McCoy employs, and the dancers, with a fatiguing and senseless expenditure of energy, capture human frailty as they are humiliated and exploited, becoming for a while a kind of freak show cheered on by a lifeless but well-heeled audience, analogous to the plight of the majority of the American labour force. Charles Musser concludes that:

More than a symbolic comment upon the desperate socio-economic condition of the Western world in the thirties, McCoy’s marathon *danse macabre* is also a universally applicable parable of modern’s man existential predicament. (Musser 2004:237)

Although this novel by McCoy was considered as a minor work upon its first publication, the reason why I am discussing it and its non-*noir* cinematic version is because, on the one hand, it presents the elements of the kind of fatalism and relentless despair that we see in Ulmer's *Detour*, for example, and also because, on the other, it shows that McCoy confronted issues head-on, while others of the hard-boiled school dealt with serious matters in a more oblique manner. In fact, McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* overtly resonates with politics as a socially conscious reaction to the injustices of the Depression era. Had the film been shot some twenty years earlier, perhaps the *noir* ambiance would have been even more present. The movie places the narrative thrust in the dance itself with flashforwards to the apprehension and trial of Robert (Michael Sarrazin), the future murderer. At first these techniques may prove confusing for the uninitiated, but they are from the *noir* stylist's perspective an echo of *film noir*'s heyday, and hence the metaphorical point about universal suffering and salvation through escape is well-achieved in this representation of life through the metaphor of a dance competition.

As he served as an aviator during World War I, McCoy sent many of his first World War stories to *Black Mask* (fig. 1), as readers were showing an avid enthusiasm for air-adventure fiction. In 1927, McCoy started a compilation of seventeen stories which were all published in *Black Mask* and many of them featured Jerry Frost, a flying Texas ranger, and were often referred to as the "Jerry tales". Just like in the other pulp magazines described above, McCoy's stories were also written in a terse style. A good example of this is his novel *No Pockets in a Shroud* (1937), whose plot is about a journalist, Mike Dolan, who misses the old days, when "a newspaper was a newspaper and called a sonofabitch a sonofabitch" (McCoy 1998:83). His job is to clean up the city at all levels, especially politically speaking, by denouncing the system and printing "some news about these political highbinders and about the big-time thieves (...) why, even the goddamn Governor of this state is crooked, and you know it" (McCoy 1998:3).

Hollywood typically avoided McCoy's novels (often regarded as being too provocative and aggressive for the social context of that time) and this is evident from the lapse of time that it took the cinema industry to adapt McCoy's novel to the big screen, nearly twenty years after publication. In the heyday of *film noir*, McCoy also worked with such key directors as Henry Hathaway, Raoul Walsh, and Nicholas Ray, but one of the more obscure directors he worked with was Gordon Douglas, who turned his novel *Kiss*

Tomorrow Goodbye (1950) into a *noir* film. Both the novel and the film accentuate violence and sadistic brutality. The film was actually forbidden in Ohio due to its “sordid, sadistic presentation of brutality and an extreme presentation of crime with explicit steps in commission” (Wilt 1991:37). Using a flashback device, the story is narrated by the amoral and unsympathetic protagonist Ralph Cotter (James Cagney), a career criminal who breaks out of prison and then murders his partner in crime. The film closely follows the opening of the novel which starts like this:

This is how it is when you wake up in the morning of the morning you have waited a lifetime for: there is no waking state. You are all at once wide awake, so wide awake that it seems you have slipped all the opiate degrees of waking, that you have had none of the sense-impressions as your soul again returns to your body from wherever it has been; you open your eyes and you are completely awake, as if you had not been asleep at all. (McCoy 1996:3)

The narrator of the novel describes the prison environment with its “seventy-two unwashed men chained to their bunks” rather vividly, and the feeling of hatred that resonates between the narrator and the other prisoners is rendered quite directly:

There was coughing and grunting and hawking and much spitting, and the man in the next bunk, Budlong, a skinny sickly sodomist, turned on his side facing me and said in a ruttish voice: ‘I had another dream about you last night, sugar.’ It will be your last, you Caresser of Calves, I thought. ‘Was it as nice as the others?’ I asked. ‘Nicer....’ he said. ‘You’re sweet. I adore you,’ I said, feeling a fine fast exhilaration that today was the day I was going to kill him – as soon as I got my hands on those pistols I was going to kill him. I hope Holiday knows what the hell about those pistols, I thought; I hope they’re where they’re supposed to be, I hope Cobbett doesn’t let us down. (McCoy 1996:5-6)

The film actually traces the last months in the life of Cotter, who soon finds out which police can be bribed and he even plans to blackmail a couple of dishonest cops, Weber (Ward Bond) and Reece (Barton MacLane), while stealing money from the mob. Along the way, his mistress, Holiday Caldwell (Barbara Payton), is threatened with exposure for her part in his escape, but she is the one who kills rather than give him up to someone else. Cagney is as ruthless as Cody Jarrett in *White Heat*, made one year earlier, but his pathology here is under control so he can blackmail cops and slickly double-cross his one-time betrayer (fig. 9).



Figure 9. *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*

The moral ambiguity that exists in most *noir* protagonists is completely absent from Ralph Cotter, despite his evil nature totally eclipsing the rest of the cast and making him a vivid portrait of the *noir* villain. However, his fellow inmate, Jinx Raynor (Steve Brodie), is much closer to the *noir* type as he shows signs of weakness and uncertainty and does not know exactly where he stands between his criminal urges and fear of retribution, so common in *noir* characters. Holiday Caldwell cannot be considered a classic *femme fatale* of *film noir* as she is neither a predictable stereotype nor is she as calculating or manipulative as other powerful portrayals of dominant women, as I will show in Part III.

In conclusion, Horace McCoy may not have been a most appreciated hard-boiled writer in his own country (he actually gave up on *Black Mask* and stopped writing for the magazine), but he certainly helped to define the hard-boiled style of the thirties. The same happened about his experience in Hollywood – McCoy wrote various screenplays for the big screen over two decades but they were by no means all praised. “These bastards never give me a shot at the A pics” (Wilt 1991:38), as he once complained about the B-movies he worked on. His two major books – *No Pockets in a Shroud* and *I Should Have Stayed*

Home (1937) – were two living proofs of that sour feeling he had towards Hollywood. In fact, they were both autobiographical and recount his sharp experiences in the cinematic industry. Even a novel such as *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* received scant attention and only got adapted to the cinema some three decades later. The novel failed to win widespread acclaim in the U.S (only three thousand copies were sold) but achieved considerable success abroad, especially in France, as the French public was already absorbing American crime and mystery stories quite extensively. The strong existentialist message that his book conveyed made many people compare him with Jean-Paul Sartre or rank him beside William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway and he was therefore named “the American existentialist”.

In all, McCoy wrote six novels and almost thirty screenplays but his reputation in the United States had always been lesser than in Europe. His contribution as a screenwriter to *film noir* may be minimal, but McCoy's *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* is a fine example of *noir* fiction because of the structure he developed for exploring the dark underworld of a corrupt city. The novel was written partially thanks to praise coming from abroad, and Warner Brothers - which has been frequently described as the most progressive American motion picture studio of the early thirties, the one which made films that habitually accepted the topics of Depression and the disruptions that accompanied it – aware of this and the contents of McCoy's previous novels, decided to acquire the rights to *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* which ended up being a success and inspired James Cagney (who wanted another “really nasty role” following his success in *White Heat*) in the role of career criminal Ralph Cotter. “At last I was safe and secure in the blackness of the womb from which I have never emerged” (Hilfer 1990:19), McCoy concludes his story. As a writer, McCoy may not have been prolific when compared with the other *Black Mask* hard-boiled writers, but he was ingeniously able to create, as seen above, one of its strongest serial heroes.

1.1.5 Cornell Woolrich

Born in 1903, Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich (1903-1968) was an American novelist whose many novels and short fiction stories were originally published in the pulp magazines of the thirties and forties. *Children of the Ritz* (1928) was his second novel, bought by First National Pictures, and made into a film one year later, directed by John Francis Dillon. This was an important step that took him to Hollywood and started him working on screenplays. Cornell Woolrich's lonely and tragic life is strongly reflected in his stories, as an alcoholic and anguished man. By the end of the thirties, Woolrich had written quite extensively in the crime domain, comprising over a hundred published stories and books.

His first crime novel was *The Bride Wore Black* (1940), which became a movie in 1967, in a co-production between France and Italy. Directed by François Truffaut, the film is a chilling and tragic portrait of fractured psychology and shattered lives, of a woman who sees her husband being murdered by the church steps on their wedding day. The story then revolves round the widow's revenge against the men who killed her husband (many thought that this movie constitutes a homage to Hitchcock by Truffaut). This was the first of a series of "black" novels, *The Black Curtain*, *The Black Alibi*, *The Black Angel*, or even more suggestive, *The Black Path of Fear*. Most of them resulted in film productions, like for example, *The Black Angel*, released by Universal in 1946. With its modest but ingenious script (Martin Blair (Dan Duryea) is the alcoholic and murderer in the film), the film depicts this down and out protagonist up against seemingly inexorable dark forces, and stands as a good example of a top-drawer B-film.

The Black Path of Fear is another Woolrich novel (and in my view, the best of his four novels) which was also made into a film, called *The Chase*, released in November 1946 by United Artists. The film is a dreamlike *noir* made by Arthur Ripley, thanks in a great measure to the dark and oppressive mood that typifies most of Cornell Woolrich's best fiction. With a simple story, the film is also remarkable for:

(...) containing almost equal quantities of those qualities that Borde and Chaumeton (in *Panorama du film noir américain*) see as quintessentially noir: its oneirism, in which a dreamlike atmosphere prevails, especially at the conclusion,

which collapses the distinction between dream and reality; its eroticism, particularly in the scene where Roman sexually badgers and then abuses his female barber and manicurist; its unprecedented elements, such as the dreamed death of the hero; and its aspects of cruelty and ambivalence, as best illustrated in what begins as a comic scene, when Johnson [Lloyd Corrigan] is looking over Roman's wine cellar accompanied by Gino and ends up being trapped there with a killer dog. (Silver & Ward 1992:55)

The Black Curtain was the first adaptation of Woolrich's work into a film by Jack Hively, named *The Street of Chance*, released by Paramount in 1942. This film is an important early entry in the *noir* canon as it institutes a set of conventions that later helped to define *film noir*. Frank Thompson (Burgess Meredith) plays the role of an amnesia victim, who awakens in the middle of an unfamiliar section of a New York street only to discover that he does not know who he is or what he has done. After a while, he comes to learn that his lost year has been haunted with many different things, including the fact that he is running away from a murder he cannot recall having committed.

Director Jack Hively manages to detain the atmosphere of Woolrich's universe, using the alienation of the protagonist, whose amnesia makes him totally frantic in New York City. The first scenes of the film give that *noir* milieu of urban angst and displacement through the visual effects and sensibility of the director of photography, Theodore Sparkuhl. Best known for his work in *La Chienne* by Jean Renoir and a veteran of both German Expressionism and French Poetic Realism - as I will further explain in the next chapters - Sparkuhl manages in *Street of Chance* to develop a whole black and chaotic world that is so characteristically of Woolrich and of *film noir*. In fact, "the pages of [his] pulps are rich with female jewel thieves of certain elegance who seem always to be in formal attire at a country house party or a penthouse soiree" (Penzler 2007:xiii). Penzler also adds that in Woolrich's novels, these young women serve as amateur detectives, but "they function largely in the same manner as their male counterparts, though they are often required to use their seductive beauty to escape capture" (ibid.). This film launched Claire Trevor's career and earned her the nickname of "Queen of *Noir*".¹⁰ In *Street of Chance*, Sparkuhl also helps to give a proper yet oppressively moody low-key lighting to the whole

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that numerous Woolrich stories were bought for the movies after publication and that Claire Trevor would be the chosen artist to play in some of them. There is a fifty-eight-minute B-movie called *Convicted* (1938), released by Columbia, and starring a young Rita Hayworth, based on "Face Work" one of Woolrich's memorable "Black" series. However, it was in the radio's famous *Suspense* series, aired as "Angel Face", with Claire Trevor as the kind stripper who tries to save her brother from being convicted of a murder, that "Face Work" attained its major success.

mise-en-scène. As the film progresses, and the protagonist Frank pieces together the true story, it resolves itself almost like a Gothic melodrama, with a more traditional perspective on human wrongdoing and weakness.

Woolrich was a crime writer who saw many of his stories turned into *film noir* screenplays, perhaps more than any other crime novelist, and many of his stories were also adapted during the forties for *Suspense*¹¹ and other drama radio programmes. Woolrich's life philosophy was particularly latent in *noir* productions, such as Harold Clurman's *Deadline at Dawn* (1946) and John Farrow's *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948). The former, like *Street of Chance*, also captures the quiet desolation of the night time people in New York City. The film is actually filled with those odd personalities for whom Woolrich seemed to have such an affection and affinity. By virtue of the *mise-en-scène* and Musuraca's RKO-style of shadowy lighting, Woolrich's narrative (writing under the name William Irish) makes this a classic film *noir*.

The scene below (fig. 10) reflects this perfect combination of features: Alex Winkley (Bill Williams) and June Goth (Susan Hayward) go to return some money that Alex found in his pocket the night before, while drunk, and which apparently belongs to Edna Bartelli (Lola Lane). When they arrive at Edna's apartment they find her dead on the floor. She is half lit by the only light in the room, a lamp that has been tumbled over in the middle of the table. The young sailor and the dancer are both looking down at her, their faces look serene and perplexed at the same time, but above all, the photography catches their disorienting gaze, as a reminder of the gloomy and fearful events that will follow.

¹¹ *Suspense* was an incredibly popular radio mystery programme that was on the air for more than twenty-two years and featured many leading Hollywood actors of that time.



Figure 10. *Deadline at Dawn*

Alex's memory is hazy after a night spent drinking and so he does not quite remember how he ended up having this bundle of cash in his pocket. June believes he is innocent of Edna's murder and agrees to help him discover the truth. However, during the film, the protagonists are given many false leads and deliberate attempts are made to distract their attention. Alex feels totally confused and lost in his search for the truth, especially because he only has a few short hours before he has to be back aboard ship in the morning. Similarly to all of Woolrich's work, *Deadline at Dawn* also contains a feeling of claustrophobia and entrapment, it has the word "dead" in its title (the words "black",

“night” and “death” obsessively appear in his titles), and its story takes place at night in the threatening streets of the city. Foster Hirsch also adds that:

The Woolrich world is a maze of wrong impressions as the author sets traps for his luckless protagonists and then watches as they fall into them. Filled with pitfalls and sudden violence, the landscape in Woolrich is the kind of place where a single wrong turn, a mere chance encounter, triggers a chain reaction in which one calamity follows another. Standing in the wings manipulating the movements of his players as though they were figures on a chessboard, Woolrich is a master contriver. His characters, more thinly conceived than those of his more illustrious hard-boiled predecessors, have no inner life, no history at all apart from their immediate use to the author as pawns in his clever games. (Hirsch 1981:44)

His *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948) is a psychological thriller with its nightclub fortune teller teetering on the brink of doom. John Triton (Edward G. Robinson), the “Mental Wizard”, plays the role of a seer with a gift he never asked for, and which will precisely feed his feeling of doom throughout the entire movie. Dark obsessions and ultimately death are the subjects of his vision, and these horrible revelations and future predictions become a burden too heavy for him to carry. Triton’s dilemma is exemplified when he tells his best friend’s daughter, “I had become a reverse zombie, the world was dead and I was living”. The *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* portrays the *noir* universe at its darkest, through the very fine camerawork from John F. Seitz. The night itself is the enemy and the other *noir* elements emphasise how Triton’s character is trapped with this curse of clairvoyance, driving him towards his inevitable end.

1.1.6 William Riley Burnett

Another novelist from the tough-guy school of writing is William Riley Burnett (1899-1982). When hired by Captain Shaw, he was instructed - just like the others - to provide “simplicity for the sake of clarity, plausibility, and belief.” Also, as mentioned above, Captain Shaw would take Hammett as his exemplar, and thus would want his writers to emphasise action, but only when it involved characterisation. In terms of theme, Burnett was closer to Dashiell Hammett or even James M. Cain, but his originality came from the fact that his characters would be pining for a better world, away from the corrupted and vicious city, but rarely, if ever, succeeding in finding it, and falling back into the tentacles of a life of criminality and dishonesty.

Burnett’s first novel was *Little Caesar* (1929) which was then turned into a hit gangster film by Mervin LeRoy for Warner Brothers, and is still considered today as the film that opened the prototypical gangster saga, as I shall discuss in the next chapter. Both the novel and the film tell the story of the rise and fall of Rico Caesare Bandella (Edward G. Robinson in the film). The novel inspired many other writers and Hollywood filmmakers like John Huston, Howard Hawks and Nicholas Ray to further develop the gangster film genre. The language used in the film was also very hard-boiled, something so newly coarse and brisk that the British publishers of Burnett’s novel were confused by the language and so they had to include a three-page glossary at the end with the first edition. Burnett explains that:

This was in the twenties. Novels were all written in a certain way, with literary language and so much description. Well, I dumped all that out; I just threw it away. It was a revolt, a literary revolt. That was my object. I wanted to develop a style of writing based on the way American people spoke - not literary English. Of course, the fact that the Chicago slang was all around me made it easy to pick up. (...) Ultimately what made *Little Caesar* the enormous success it was, the smack in the face it was, was the fact that it was the world seen completely through the eyes of a gangster. It's a commonplace now, but it had never been done before then. You had crime stories but always seen through the eyes of society. The criminal was just some son-of-a-bitch who'd killed somebody and then you go get 'em. I treated 'em as human beings. Well, what else are they? (in Hamilton 1990:49)

Another example of Burnett's work adapted for film is *High Sierra* (1941), directed by Raoul Walsh and screenwritten by John Huston and William Burnett himself. Humphrey Bogart, as Roy Earle, and Ida Lupino, playing Marie Garson, are both criminals. Their moral complexity is revealed in their own human weaknesses, or what William Burnett considered the unbearable fatality of being trapped when someone enters a life of crime. We, as viewers, share a certain sympathy for and understanding of both characters, along the lines of what Burnett sought to achieve in the novel, that is, all of his characters were human, and therefore pitiable to their inexorable fate. *High Sierra* is also a good example of the difficulty in defining *film noir* as some critics consider the film to be a decided gangster film, whereas others perceive it to be a prototypical *noir* production. In my opinion, the thematic and stylistic relationships between the two types of film are made evident here, and this lays bare the variety of icons and motifs they share. *High Sierra* contains the presence of a gangster, a fictional peer to John Dillinger, whose main objective is, as he says, "to crash out" to a free life of which he is both a creator and a master. Moreover, the fact that the film is a powerful expression of the individual's pursuit of freedom may in some ways dissociate it from the *noir* cycle. Conversely to *film noir*, the major scenes do not occur at nighttime in contemporary urban settings with wet streets and neon lights everywhere; rather, *High Sierra* depicts the protagonists outside, in broad daylight, with the characters moving about in verdant parks and lush mountains. However, one thing remains common: Roy seems to be condemned from the very start, as his face appears carved out for death and Marie has the battered look of a fallen angel, as fig. 11 below shows. Finally, their fight towards freedom emphasises Walsh's sense of a cruel, inescapable fate reinforced by his grim view of human existence, which is indeed a *noir* conception.



Figure 11. *High Sierra*

The Asphalt Jungle (1950) was another of W. R. Burnett's novels to be adapted to the screen. Directed by John Huston, this *film noir* is infused with a feeling that society is generally hypocritical and just as corrupted as the individual human criminals that live in it. This gritty film was one of the first to show a meticulous robbery and its final outcome from the criminals' point of view, making the attitudes shared by the small-time crooks sound as if there is nothing criminal in what they do. In fact, the film seems to be more of a character study at certain times than an action film, showing both the protagonists' reliability and treachery in the violent world of criminality. Burnett ended up agreeing that it was "without a doubt one of the best films of its genre" (Muller 1998:75). Regarding Burnett's adaptations into movies, Arthur Lyons also adds that:

All the movies are united thematically in that the universe of the protagonist, either internal or external, is out of control. What differentiates *The Asphalt Jungle*, for instance, a film noir about a group of gangsters planning and pulling off a jewellery heist, from earlier gangster movies such as *Little Caesar* (1930) and *The Public Enemy* (1931) is that it is a psychological study showing how flaws of character combined with fate predetermine the failure and ultimately the destruction of the participants in the heist. (Lyons 2000:9)

Personally, I would also add that what distinguishes this naturalistic *noir* film from the other gangster films (to be analysed in detail in the next chapter) is the feeling of background authenticity that is instilled in this production. In the scene pictured below (fig.

12), we see the three men planning a detailed jewel robbery: legendary burglar, Doc Riedenschneider (Sam Jaffe), a crooked lawyer, Alonzo D. Emmerich (Louis Calhern), and a down-and-out hoodlum, Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden). The cinematography (by Harold Rosson) is expressive throughout the film (this scene with the three men lined up emphasises their uncertain psychology, especially Doc's shifty look), and so is Miklós Rosza's musical score which raises the film to a high emotional pitch. The *noir* elements of anguish and hostility are reinforced by the ill-luck of events in the film, and are all summed up in the opinion of lawyer Emmerich: "crime is only a left-handed form of human endeavour". This idealisation, that there is nothing really criminal about what they are doing, is another bitter comment on the brutal realities of the *noir* world.



Figure 12. *The Asphalt Jungle*

1.1.7 Conclusions

What made the detective magazines so popular were their heroic figures at the centre of the action. In fact, “the hard-boiled cop or, especially, private detective was the idealization of the lone individual, representing justice and decency, pitted against virulent gangs, corrupt politicians, or other agencies who violated that sense of goodness with which most readers identified” (Penzler 2007:xi). This can still be found in the *noir* productions that were then adapted over the years from these hard-boiled stories but which were made to serve often less heroic themes. Similarly to jazz, the hard-boiled private detective remains a wholly American invention, and it was certainly created and given life by the criminal and investigative freedom that the pulp fiction magazines indulged. Although this kind of magazine contained a wide variety of genre fiction, the traditional pulps greatly focused on detective novels and mystery stories.

The term today has somewhat lost its meaning, as short stories of this type have changed into a different breed of creative writing, though undeniably pulp fiction has contributed to the evolution of the hero popular fiction of today. However, back in the thirties and forties pulp was a descriptive term which revealed the mass reading preferences of the Americans at that time, their social concerns, and certain attitudes towards political life too. Produced on poor quality paper, these magazines were aimed at the lower social classes and were an alternative to more elitist publications. They managed to satisfy the tastes of the lower working classes and immigrants, and to address their desires and anxieties, especially during the years that followed the Depression era. In fact, many people would see them as an escape from reality, as a form of evasion, where readers were able to identify with protagonists who were also in flight from reality.

Considered as a fruitful source with many of the core ingredients that formed *film noir* in Hollywood in the forties, hard-boiled novels were purchased by the studios due to the increasing interest the public was showing for these kinds of book. They were also choked with advertisements suggesting the commercial viability of such subject matters. Their covers were brilliantly coloured (frequently with young women in peril or as object of desire) marked by graphic and explicit sensationalism and a terse writing style, mainly in the first-person, that emphasised action and adventure over introspection. In this way, millions of copies of this new, uniquely American literature were sold every week.

Raymond Chandler not only agreed with this but also added that:

My own opinion is that the studios have gone in for these pictures because the Hays Office is becoming more liberal. I think they're okaying treatments now which they would have turned down ten years ago, probably because they feel people can take the hard-boiled stuff nowadays. Of course people have been reading about murderers, cutthroats, and thieves in the newspapers for the past hundred years, but only recently has the Hays Office permitted the movies to depict life as it really is. (Hanson 2008:42)

The Hays Office, named after Will Hays, former head of the Republican National Committee and self-appointed arbiter of national morality, was in fact set up in 1922 to censor what could go into the movies. Section 2 will analyse the mechanisms of censorship, dealing with both the ways the studio heads would challenge the banned subjects of the Production Code, and how A and B productions managed to resist and operate in the face of taboo restrictions. I will also investigate the reasons why the Hays Office was so active in retarding the release of *noir* films, taking into account what Will Hays constantly claimed, that "entertainment is the commodity for which the public pays at the box office. Propaganda disguised as entertainment would be neither honest salesmanship nor honest showmanship" (Schwartz 1983:192).

In this context of censorship, it is also important to note that the reason why it took such a long while for the hard-boiled tradition to penetrate into the film industry (until the mid- forties) is because these writers developed an understated vernacular style and their stories often promised a crime thriller tied up with graphic sex and violence. Since Hollywood films were intended for a family audience, they were subject to close censorship which prose fiction escaped. Whatever is the case, nearly twenty percent of *noir* thrillers produced during the forties were direct adaptations of hard-boiled novels and short stories, and so the work of the American hard-boiled writers, such as the ones discussed in this chapter, constituted the essential and immediate influence on *film noir*'s subject matter and characterisation.

Above all, these engaging magazines contained some of the best of American detective and hard-boiled fiction as a way of moving away from the older conventional detective story, "to reflect the violence of American society and the vivid colloquialisms of American speech" (Symons 1977:21). Beyond the legacy of such successful and entertaining stories - judging from their longevity, circulation, and profitability - pulp

fiction managed to provide for a defiant and frequently dissident literary vision (they presented dangers, excitement and readily obtainable sex) to the mass consciousness while helping to form its cinematic experience. In fact, they strengthened the rising interest of Hollywood in the adaptation of hard-boiled novels, inspiring film directors and screenwriters alike, and it ultimately created a pool of writing talent and story lines which laid the foundation for many of the pre-eminent *noir* film productions.

1.2 The Gangster Film

“Snatched from today’s headlines” is how Warner Brothers advertised their gangster movies in the 1930s, and it’s a fair indicator of the origins of the genre. “Today’s headlines”, however, is a bit of an exaggeration – “Last decade’s headlines” would be more accurate. (Hughes 2005:3)

Gangster movies have existed for almost as long as cinema itself. Once they entered the public consciousness there was no stopping them, and they swiftly became a Hollywood staple. Many sub-genres later, today’s mobsters and hitmen have come a long way. Yet all of them remain ultimately cut from the same hoodlum cloth, recognizable descendants of a long tradition of dirty, yellow-bellied rats. (Hughes 2005:23)

In this chapter, I examine what the gangster film and *film noir* have in common, but most essentially what makes the former a genre in its own right, and why sometimes this genre seems to overlap with the *noir* cycle. Many scholars support the idea that *film noir* is in fact a challenging development within the general history of the gangster film, and therefore I focus on the cultural influence it wielded over *film noir*, but at the same time I distinguish between the two types of films, especially in terms of their narrative approach and the respective complexities that follow or form it.

The major cycle of gangster films appeared during the end of the Hollywood silent era, enabling it to capture the striking and theatrical sound of tommy guns, the shrieking car tires, the screeching brakes, and just as significantly, the fast beating rhythm of the gangster’s speech. With the National Prohibition Act of 1919, known as the Volstead Act,¹² or more popularly as “Prohibition”, the country would be prohibited from manufacturing, transporting and selling beverages (“beer, wine, or other intoxicating malt or vinous liquor”) containing more than 0.5 per cent of alcohol. One of the major upshots of the Prohibition Era was the development of gangsterism and crime. To guarantee that prohibition would actually be enforced was a difficult assignment for the police and an

¹² The Act would come into force on January, 17, 1920.

escalation in illegal drinking places occurred. So did the popularity of nightclubs, with their jazz and dancing girls, making them a stylistic requisite of the gangster film genre (and certainly an inspiration for *film noir* later). Prohibition, moreover, contributed to boost criminal behaviour, from “moonshining” (people who distilled alcohol illegally) to bootlegging (those who sold the alcohol and imported it from other countries). It also led many directors to approach these topics as compelling subjects for films.¹³

However, as the introductory quotes above correctly point out, criminal activity had started long before the thirties. In fact, criminal or gangster films date back to the early days of film during the silent era, with, for instance, *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), a 17-minute silent film directed by D. W. Griffith. From a documentary perspective, and shot in the exteriors of the Lower East Side of New York (more specifically on 12th West Street, not very far from the production studios of Biograph), the movie offers a view of organised crime (*Pig Alley* is precisely the name given to the dregs of the marginal streets where the protagonists live) and reveals Griffith’s concern with the plights of poor working people, left to the mercy of criminals. From this point of view, *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* can be understood as an anticipation of many other gangster productions – especially *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) – which during the second half of the thirties analyses the social phenomenon of the causes of delinquency. That noted, the real importance of this movie derives mostly from the fact that it introduces themes and motives that would be representative of this cinematographic genre, namely police corruption, the confrontation of rival gangs, and so forth.

Three years later another silent feature came out, following the same social concern and bears a suggestive title, *Regeneration* (1915) by Raoul Walsh.¹⁴ It follows the tale of a young boy’s life who becomes a ragged orphan when his mother dies. This type of “regeneration” from child abuse and beating, from slum to settlement, sounds totally unreal as Owen Conway can be reformed by love. In fact, it proves too difficult for him to resist the pull of his past life, and therefore denying any possibility of regeneration (fig. 13).

¹³ Several films were later made on the subject of Prohibition, particularly bootlegging. A 1958 production by Arthur Ripley, called *Thunder Road*, is a good example. The film, virtually owned and carried by Robert Mitchum, is a battle-and-chase crime drama of a Kentucky moonshiner, the US Treasury agents cracking down on bootleggers and the mobsters who make every attempt to take things over themselves.

¹⁴ The script was adapted from a play which was itself based on a book, the autobiography of gangster Owen Kildare.



Figure 13. *Regeneration*

This squalid view of slum life was filmed mostly on location in New York City which offers a very tangible reality. Both the characters of the big city and the protagonist would constitute some key topics which foreshadowed the (un)heroic *noir* protagonist, with a sense of tragedy dominating the main character's life, as I exemplify below.

Films such as *Underworld* (1927) and *The Racket* (1928) would mark the end of the silent cinema's treatment of organised crime. The former, directed by Josef von Sternberg, is about bank robber Bull Weed (George Bancroft), who picks up a drunken, down-and-out lawyer, named Rolls Royce (Clive Brook), to help him in the Chicago underworld of crime. Together with moll Feathers McCoy (Evelyn Brent) the trio enjoys the high life in their favourite bar, *Dreamland*, until it all begins to fall apart.¹⁵ The film was based on a

¹⁵ The film presents a character, Bull Weed, who symbolises the archetypal gangster, portrayed by his brutality and animalist behaviour, the interpretative gestures, his mania of flipping a coin through his fingers (just like Rinaldo in *Scarface*). In the same way, when coming out from the *Dreamland* Café, Bull reads a lit-

Ben Hecht story and despite being predicted to be a failure (to the extent that Hecht wanted to have his name removed from the credits list), it turned out to be a great success, giving Hecht the first of his two Academy Awards. The movie is still written about as the first real gangster movie; and whether one agrees with this or not, the evidence of Sternberg's rich imagination, expressed in his mixture of realism and German Expressionism, is undeniable. The themes of alienation, betrayal and corruption depicted in this shadowy and moody von Sternberg film all anticipate *film noir*. Indeed, some other films by Josef von Sternberg are also considered to have influenced the development of *film noir*. In movies like *The Docks of New York* (1928) and proto-noir *Thunderbolt* (1929), the Austrian-born US director evokes an underworld of prostitution, jail and criminality that would constitute the subject matter of many *noir* productions, like, for example, *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), also directed by von Sternberg. In fact, this early *noir* film explores the decadent lives and secret pasts of all its main protagonists, with its evil, nightmarish, almost Baroque atmosphere holding much of what was to correspond to a standard expression of the *noir* vision.

The latter, *The Racket*, is a Lewis Milestone film and it tells the story of an honest Irish cop, Captain McQuigg (Thomas Meighan), who will do anything to destroy bootlegger and mobster, Nick Scarsi (Louis Wolheim), but in vain, however, as political corruption seems to be stronger, letting the Chicago underworld prosper unhindered. Aghast at the law and the city administration, McQuigg takes justice into his own hands. Scarsi (a thinly-veiled Al Capone) is the first modern gangster protagonist, clearly based on real-life gangsters of his day, with political as well as criminal power. It comes as no surprise then that real crime bosses intimidated the star of the film and asked for it to be banned. It was censored in many different theatres across the country, as they were not so eager to see themselves represented on the big screen. Since this movie is lost today, it is not possible to evaluate its visual impact, but what is germane to this discussion is that both of the above features constituted a new defining moment for the gangster film, and by freeing up the use of topical material, often against the orders from moral guardians such as the Hays-Breen Office, they ultimately also had an impact on *film noir*.

Three classic gangster films, following each other one year apart, are still seen today as marking a new film genre and the beginning of a new wave of gangster films,

up outdoor "The City is Yours", establishing a connection with *Underworld* or *Scarface*'s similar logo: "The World is Yours".

following the invention and extension of sound. *Little Caesar* (1930) is regarded as a seminal film in the sense that it cemented the standards for the gangster genre. Based on a W. R. Burnett novel, the film is considered “the grandfather of the modern crime film” by many film historians with its portrayal of an underworld character who rebelliously defied conventional morality. Edward G. Robinson is a small-time crook named Caesar Enrico Bandello, aka “Rico”, and along with his friend Joe Massara (Douglas Fairbanks Jr.), leaves the country and makes his way to Chicago in search of fortune (fig. 14). Rico’s catchphrase throughout the film “You can dish it out but you can’t take it” summons the classic gangster story back to its bloody real-life roots in hard-men and corrupt police, shysters and hoods. The world of the criminals seems to be mixed up with that of the police detectives, themselves a mixture of the corruptible and incorruptible.



Figure 14. *Little Caesar*

The image that this type of films seeks to convey is one of a country struggling with the Depression and the public’s awareness of the difficulties the American economy was going through. On the other hand, these films also had a strong social message about the myths of the self-made man: that crime does not pay and that the gangster is always beaten in the end by the system. Even if the gangster figure in general and in *Little Caesar* in particular is one of vitality and enterprise, a man who carved success for himself (creating his own gang and climbing up the crime corporate ladder) to get away from the misery of the Prohibition-Depression era, the film also shows that his unscrupulous ambition to move up in the world (the idea of “can’t take it”) will lead him into a hail of bullets: “Mother of

Mercy! Is this the end of Rico?" These are Rico's final words which, years later, would be in close consonance with his counterpart Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) in *White Heat* (1949), one of the *film noir*'s most deranged and unsettled protagonists. The film also concludes with Cody, mortally wounded, climbing to the top of a huge tank of explosive gas and, while shooting it out, and before it blows up, shouts out to his dead mother and the world: "Made, Ma! Top of the world!"

The second film is called *The Public Enemy* (1931), directed by William A. Wellman, and which charts the rise and fall of a gangster Tom Powers (James Cagney), and his friend Matt Doyle (Edward Woods). They are in fact very good friends and juvenile criminals, from early shoplifting days in 1909, then following the same paths to their robbery of a factory in 1915, and ending up working for dandy gangster Nails Nathan (Leslie Fenton) around 1920 at the start of Prohibition. One can see that the film is structured just like a chronicle of the birth of gangsterism in North America, with the action being developed in four distinctive story moments corresponding to 1909, World War I, the Prohibition Era, and the economic Depression. This concern by the writer, John Bright, and director William A. Wellman to make the dates clear to the spectator constitutes a narrative technique to tell us, once again, about the processes of rise and fall of the main protagonist.¹⁶

At home, Tom's brother, Mike (Donald Cook), is quite the opposite: he is an upright, hard-working boy during the day and goes to school at night. He will eventually enrol in the Marines to fight in World War I. Tom is the son of a policeman, Officer Powers (Purnell Pratt) who has always proven to be a severe and abusive father. The scenes of harsh discipline imposed by the father are either implicit or exemplified, like the one in which he uses a wide leather razor strop. Tom resists shedding tears and always keeps a tough guy attitude, which will be the one he will harden into throughout his life. Later, Tom and Matt become the leaders of Nails's gang, strong-arming bar owners into selling their beer.

The film opens with a disclaimer from Warner Bros. Pictures: "It is the ambition of the authors of *The Public Enemy* to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal. While the

¹⁶ Only a decade later *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) would incorporate, yet in a more reflexive manner, this kind of historical register in its narrative structure, at the same time that it presented a metalinguistic discourse about gangster cinema.

story of *The Public Enemy* is essentially a true story, all names and characters appearing herein, are purely fictional.” This kind of note either at the beginning or the end of the films was forced on films by the censors to show the audiences, as said above, that crime does not pay, no matter how attractive its fleeting rewards. In the same vein, perhaps, the film shows the two brothers, Tom and Mike, two sides of the same coin, that is, both brought up in the same social context and yet with separate moral codes in the face of the world. The type of cruelty that Tom Powers brags about is depicted throughout the four main moments of the narrative described above. Thus, he badgers Matt’s little sister, making her fall while she is roller-skating, slaps Jane (Mia Marvin) without any particular reason, and finally, squashes half of a grapefruit onto Kitty’s (Mae Clark) face, one of the most iconic scenes in the film (fig. 15 left).



Figure 15. *The Public Enemy*

Both films depict a sociology of crime rising from poverty and childhood abuse, with characters that are converted into stereotypes mostly described through the brutality in their actions, the infantilism of their behaviour, their vanity in their smoking tuxedos, their fascination with luxury as a sign of power, the repressed homosexuality manifested in their reactions to women and the kind of relationship they maintain with their friends (Joe Masara and Matt Doyle, respectively). Perhaps too, for the same reasons, the film ends with another disclaimer, alerting the audience that “The END of Tom Powers is the end of every hoodlum. “The Public Enemy” is not a man nor is it a character. It is a problem that sooner or later, WE, the public must solve.”

The third originating gangster movie is Howard Hawks's *Scarface* (1932). Although the film was completed in 1930, it was held up a couple of years as it was modified due to several submissions to censorship. It was felt to be too violent but most of all to glorify the gangster lifestyle and thus some of the scenes had to be re-edited (the ending was also changed) and similar to the other productions mentioned above, it was requested that the film have an introductory note and a subtitle called "The Shame of the Nation". However, the Board of Censors never seemed to accept that this violent film was meant to be a warning from its director about organised crime and the need to lower levels of crime.



Figure 16. *Scarface*

The film takes place during the Prohibition era and it depicts what was used as the best strategy in getting various speakeasies to order large amounts of booze. *Scarface* is very much a product of its time: Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) is a brutal and arrogant gangster with a scar on his face (modelled after the real Al Capone) who very rapidly finds himself taking over the rackets in town (fig. 16), after having killed his former employer, mob boss Big Louis Costillo. The film gains a new dimension in representing the brutality of organised crime with Camonte and his partner, Guino Rinaldo (George Raft) reaching the top of the bootlegging chain, as other crime bosses get murdered by crooks and cops alike.

The movie very much accentuates the tragic fate that governs Camonte's life (and the protagonists of similar films). We almost know in advance his end and the path that will lead to it. At the same time, we feel the incestuous relationship that exists between himself and his sister Cesca (Ann Dvorak), inspired by the Borgia family and which culminates with the death of Rinaldo as Tony comes to believe he is his sister's lover, without knowing that he had just married her. This is the type of background luridness that occupies this film, with a torrent of assassinations and stylised violence. The film abounds with symbols like a rosary of crosses, representing death, or X (the symbol of elimination) which mimetically prefigures each of the murders.

Scarface thus helped to define the gangster period and gave rise to the production of dozens of similar productions. It still stands as a perfect example of the contradiction that existed between America as the land of opportunities and plenty and America as a violent jungle. Indeed, the Hays Office, recognising the film's danger, established a new code with clauses directly aimed at it. The code declared that movies could no longer present crimes "in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation" (see p. 465). The Hays Office told Hawks that "Gangsterism must not be mentioned in the cinema. *Scarface* will never be released".

Lloyd Hughes, in his *Rough Guide to Gangsters Movies*, explains why these three films are seminal pieces of work of the early 1930s:

This triumvirate defined every trope, every icon, and every theme of the classic model: the rise and fall of an immigrant, the allusions to Al Capone, the honour killings, the moll, the cars, the tommy guns, the gang war, the significance of clothes, the best friend, the loyal mother, the father figure who must be killed and usurped, the shoot-out in the streets, and the pathetic death of the protagonist, usually apotheosized by some famous last words. (Hughes 2005:28)

This film troika, often referred to as an "unholy trinity", embodies the most famous examples of the gangster movies, generating a near-instant genre paradigm. They also anticipated certain elements later developed in *film noir*, and from the aesthetic point of view, they foreclosed the classic iconography of the gangster movie that with a few exceptions continues to exist to this day. The use of explosive violence, the charismatic good / bad guy, the glowing nocturnal streets, the fetishised weaponry, firing from moving cars or armoured trucks, became integral to these films. In fact, all these elements became

part of the recurrent patterns of visual imagery of the gangster films for they set them apart visually from other types of film. In terms of casting, the actors playing the roles in these films, with successive appearances in the genre, further established their protagonists on the screen to the extent that actors seemed to gather within themselves the qualities of the genre they appeared in and were easily recognised as such by the movie-going public. Hollywood leading actors, such as Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney or Humphrey Bogart and George Raft or Richard Widmark, governed the gangster films of the thirties and early forties. In this sense, genres become definable as such by repetition of tropes until reasonably fixed conventions are established, and this is evident in the variety of characters in the gangster film with their precise physical features (strong-arm men, racketeers with hoarse voices), specific roles (hoods with the necessary ruthlessness and brutality), and a fixed attire (usually expressed by large hats and heavy coats). In short, the viewer knows straight away what to expect of these characters from their physical attributes, their outfits, and their postures.

These repeated patterns of visual imagery might be called the iconography of the genre. In the case of the gangster film, the genre elements, namely those related to motifs, themes and icons have remained unceasingly recognisable. By comparison, a spectator might also recognise frequent features in *film noir* that may lead him / her to believe that they are watching a *noir* production. Although icons and themes also contribute to the identity of *film noir*, the *noir* movement changed throughout the forties and fifties, adding a new thematic dimension (for example, the *noir* semi-documentaries, as I will suggest later) and also a new moral emphasis. The *noir* characters are frequently caught in a bind not of their making, falsely accused or otherwise entrapped, alienated from normal society, not tough guys or thugs but rather ordinary people caught in unexpected circumstances. Also, in *film noir* violence follows a certain ritual that renders it quite unique and distinguishes it from the gangster films. Although violence seems to be more controlled in *noir* films, it is paradoxically more brutal and wilder in others (I am thinking about films like Jules Dassin's *Brute Force* (1947) the violence in which functions as a clear metaphor for an existential vision of the world translated into a hopeless living: "Nobody escapes, nobody ever escapes" remarks the prison doctor; or Robert Parrish's *The Mob* (1951), a violent film inhabited with squalid characters and events which typify corruption and brutality). Moreover, when it comes to lighting effects, the gangster film does not possess

the kind of dark ambience that is so characteristic of *noir*, with its low-key photography and chiaroscuro. The expressive conventions of *film noir*, at the level of camerawork and lighting, connote such qualities as alienation (the dark streets, for instance, become emblems of it), obsession (the camera's dim light showing the character's unrelenting gaze), or paranoia and a hauntedness which violence cannot dispel.

Scarface was the epitome of violence for its time and its ruthless characters were, for example, expanded on later in *film noir*. Tony's sister, Francesca (Ann Dvorak), seeks to have her own independence but her brother's domineering control asphyxiates her, leading to the film's sense of entrapment and claustrophobia with its strong whiff of perverse sexuality. Most of these elements (which would later punctuate *noir* narratives), were already part of the three earliest gangster films that I have discussed. Vain Little Caesar would have no time for women or any sort of social relationship except with his childhood friend Joe Massara; Tom Powers confounds women with distorted images of mothers and prostitutes;¹⁷ and Toni Camonte holds an obliquely incestuous interconnection with his sister. In each case, the characters seem to care only about their own egos and their public images, and their misogyny is in stark contrast to the sense of inferiority and compulsive attractions recurrent in *film noir*. The gangster story certainly suggests that the "bad guy" is not average or normal when compared to the rest of the society; however, there is usually a simple moral dilemma when contrasting good and evil. The idea laying behind the gangster film is to put an end to organised crime by showing that the antihero character may rise rapidly but must inevitably fall and die in squalor. The unheroic *noir* protagonists do not dominate their environments like public figures. The labyrinths of corruption mean that it is extended from the petty criminals to the most powerful and influential sectors in society, like police departments, businesses, and political circles. It is a maze for the *noir* protagonist because there is no turning back once they enter it and there are no readily available moral compasses.

Unlike the gangster (whose whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual and who ultimately finds himself eradicated by the forces of social order), the *noir* hero is weighed down by failure and assailed by the twists of fate itself; often in a strictly moral sense they do not deserve what happens to them. As Al Roberts (Tom Neal), the main

¹⁷ The breakfast scene (see fig. 15 above) in which Tom Powers, in his stripped pyjamas, abuses Kitty (Mae Clarke) with a grapefruit that he plants full on his face remains a classic example of the gangster's sexual attitudes.

protagonist of Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* notes, "That's life. Whichever way you turn, fate sticks out a foot to trip you". Indeed, the film shows that his struggle against fate is injurious to himself, as he concludes: "Fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all." The *noir* main character is normally more withdrawn, introspective and alienated from the rest of American society, and usually wants to escape from himself and from a past which continues to obsess him. At bottom, the gangster is doomed because once he gets to the top he starts feeling insecure (like Macbeth, the method he uses to attain power leave him open to others), and so through paranoia he is likely to bring about his own downfall and death.

The protagonist in many *noir* films is a man who walks alone, in the city streets, who elects to travel a path outside the law. Being a social narrative, the gangster story also takes place in the American big city, classically either New York or Chicago, where the gangster shows his refusal to conform or bow down to economic adversity, especially during the Prohibition and Great Depression era. The urban setting in the thirties gangster story is slightly different from the city that appears in *film noir*. Most of the scenes in gangster dramas are shot as interiors, in studio sets. We get to see the buildings from the outside within large and crowded cities as establishing shots but then rapidly the city seems to narrow down into the secret subterranean world of the criminal: hotel rooms, jazz and nightclubs, sleazy bars, casinos, where stylishly dressed gang bosses and their female companions (the "molls", as Hughes refer to them) toast their crimes with prohibited drinks. These places are all connected to organised crime and its rewards. In *noir*, these types of scenario are also typical, namely the jazz clubs and nightclubs, as Nicholas Christopher remarks:

(...) in the noir city, the nightclub can serve as a glittering, silvery-black mirror reflecting the after-hours diversions of the postwar economic boom, and at the same time can appear to be no more than a sordid, gloomy watering hole for life's losers. A place which the noir hero must enter for various reasons during his quest – usually with disdain. The nightclub can be the center of a duplicitous moral or criminal web, run by a man whose interests radiate outward from the club itself. (Christopher 1997:120)

Gangsters were therefore, like the *noir* hero, creatures of the city, which provided them with protection to a certain extent. However, in its beginnings and through its

metamorphosis into *film noir*, the city in which gangsters move about appears very often in the daylight, a contrast to the enclosed urban darkness found in *noir*.

Josef von Sternberg's *Underworld* mentioned above comes closest to being an underworld *noir* film, being more tangible and more threatening than other *noir* precursors. Despite a harsh review when it was first screened,¹⁸ *The Shanghai Gesture* contains much of what was to develop into "the standard expression of *noir*" and it surely captures the flavour of the city in the thirties. Like many of the gangster films, this also has a title disclaimer: "Our story has nothing to do with the present" and it has to be noted that it also suffered numerous changes mandated by the Hays Office. The plot revolves around a young woman, Victoria Charteris (Gene Tierney), also known as Poppy Smith, who is the daughter of Sir Guy Charteris (Walter Huston), a wealthy British financier. Dragon-lady Mother Gin Sling (Ona Munson) is the proprietor of a Shanghai casino which Sir Guy has decided to close down as it sits on real estate he has bought, despite the bribes that he gets from her. The rest of the plot works on around this triangular axis, and make Poppy Smith the key portrayal of *noir* fatality.

The casino's nightlife depicted in *The Shanghai Gesture* is extremely detailed, with its own social codes, and works as a "miniature city-within-the-city", as Christopher identifies it in his comment above. Many *noir* films have the word "city" or the word "street" in their titles (see p. 411) since often the city is transformed into a maze, psychologically charged with the protagonist's innermost conflicts and desires. The symbolic meaning of the *noir* city is also rooted in a sense of urban claustrophobia showing that in *film noir* there is no separation between the disturbed depths of a society (its *noir* underworld) and the acceptable modes of living within that society. The amplitude of the city in the gangster story differs from the one in the *noir* thrillers inasmuch as the gangster encapsulates the city and its hidden and secret subworld serves as the place where he manages his economic activities, deploying all means of violence and brutality necessary to achieve his goals. In the *noir* story the city assumes a near mythic power and engulfs the protagonist who thus becomes aware of his own insignificance, as I will

¹⁸ On the day the film was released (26th December 1941), *The New York Times* annotated that, "[the film] is so utterly and lavishly pretentious, so persistently opaque and so very badly acted in every leading role but one that its single redeeming feature is that it finally becomes laughable." The article newspaper also noted that "the director was apparently so interested in shooting magnificent scenes that he overlooked the necessity of fitting together a lucid film" (in DelGaudio 1993:150).

exemplify in Part *III* ("Space and the *Noir* City"). Robert Warshow documented it well when he observed:

The gangster movie with its numerous variations (...) sets forth the attractions of violence in the face of all our higher social attitudes. It is a more "modern" genre than the Western, perhaps even more profound, because it confronts industrial society on its own ground – the city – and because, like much of our advanced art, it gains its effects by a gross insistence on its own narrow logic. (Warshow 1972:152)

While the influence of thirties gangster films on *film noir* is great, I have noted that the protagonist acts differently in each cinematographic context. Moreover, the gangster film rapidly defined a genre embedded in social reality (which the public could easily identify from their reading of newspapers), and made audiences understand that at the end the downfall of the gangster comes rapidly and inexorably (one could argue however that this was the Hays Office propaganda, and that after all crime can pay). The criminal archetype that came into existence was imbued with the idea of social alienation and the notion that his destruction will be due to his excessive willingness to strive for power and money and that the loss of self-control results in self-destruction (a conception which is not so very different from *film noir*). The changing representation of criminality from street-level gangsterism to smooth and occluded organised crime appeared throughout the fifties in *film noir*, from *The Enforcer* (1951) and *the Racket* (1951) only to continue up to the present with *The Departed* (2006), for example.

Susan Hayward also states that the two major events in the socioeconomic history of the United States - the period of Prohibition and the Depression that set in after it - facilitated to structure the legendary significance of the gangster in movies. She also notes that the many gang conflicts and acts of violence and criminality that occurred in the cities were daily reported in the popular press. The male protagonist in these films embodied contradictions between the desire for success and the need for social constraint, which made spectator identification possible. The gangster film is after all about capitalism, and hence the death of the gangster is almost an ideological necessity: his exhilarating success is a radical challenge to the social fabric.

As I said above, this was essentially the core message or theme that gangster films wanted to convey: crime pays but not for too long and criminals end up being taken to court and punished accordingly. All in all, social norms and justice for law-abiding citizens

have to be reinforced. It did not take too long for the Hays code to be applied once the PCA (see p. 138) assumed the control of censorship and enforced the Motion Picture Production Code in 1934. And so, while in the early thirties the gangster films accounted for a great share of Hollywood's studio contributions, the genre started to lose its popularity and the studios cut back considerably on the production of such films. Finally, on this, it is worth citing Susan Hayward at length:

The classic age of the gangster movie (1930-4) was brought to a swift halt in an ambience of moral panic. Pressure was put on the Hays Office to do more than ask the film industry to apply self-censorship. In 1934 the Production Code, which condemned among other things films glorifying gangsters, became mandatory. Given the popularity of the genre, film companies were not going to give up such a lucrative scenario. Forced to water down the violence, they produced a set of subgenres: private-eye films and detective thrillers. [¹⁹] That is, without dropping much of the violence, they now foregrounded the side of the law and order (...). Told to put a stop to the heroization of gangsters and violence, they simply shifted the role of hero from gangster to cop or private eye. Thanks to the Hays code intervention, the seeds for *film noir* were sown (Hayward 2006:154).

¹⁹ Also, J. Edgar Hoover – a bureaucrat risen to fame and glory on the bullet-riddled back of John Dillinger – suggested to the studios that instead of producing gangster movies they make films about the F.B.I. as an attempt to counteract what many conservative political leaders claimed was a disturbing trend of glorifying criminals in the gangster films. The first would be called *G-Men* (1935), again starring James Cagney, this time in the role of James “Brick” Davis, a New York city lawyer who decides to be a “G-Man”.

1.3 The Gothic Romance

*And travellers, now, within that valley,
Through the red-litten window, see
Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;
While, like a ghastly rapid river,
Through the pale door,
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh — but smile no more.²⁰*

The Gothic romance was a type of novel which originated in late eighteenth-century England. As a genre, it is claimed that the author Horace Walpole invented it with his book called *The Castle of Otranto* written in 1764. Walpole's work was tremendously popular with its supernatural happenings and mysterious ambiance which became widely emulated in fiction. The Gothic features accounts of terrifying and horrific experiences in ancient castles, most of them connected with subterranean dungeons, secret passageways and locked rooms containing dark secrets, flickering lamps, screams and moans, bloody hands, ghosts and graveyards, and so forth.

The Gothic settings showed a taste for the wild and the morbid, given form in old mansions and castles in ruin. It migrated to the United States by the end of the eighteenth century and was further "Gothicised" in the hands of authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe. Both writers laid the groundwork for the *film noir* style of dark themes with horrid plot twists. Hawthorne has perhaps not seen his works well served by the cinema but those by Poe have been most appreciated. In fact, Edgar Allan Poe has had many of his works, with their Gothic and obsessive themes, turned into film productions. His book *The Fall of the House of Usher* has been made into various film versions but I will only mention a silent one back in 1928 by James Watson and Melville Weber.²¹

²⁰ Verses from the poem *The Haunted Palace* (1839) inserted into the narrative of *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The text is by Edgar Allan Poe and it illustrates the ending paradox of Roderick's essential downfall, which is simultaneously his transcendence.

²¹ Not to be confused with Jean Epstein and Luis Buñuel's version, also filmed as a silent movie in 1928. In this version, the plot also occurs in a sinister house, inhabited by Roderick Usher and his young wife, Madeline. For censorship reasons, Epstein had to cut off the scenes which implied the incestuous relations between the brother-sister couple. This, in my opinion, takes away Poe's main intention or vision.

Both the book and its film adaptation narrate the case of Roderick Usher (Herbert Stern, in the film) who suffers from an unnamed malady, perhaps based upon a family congenital illness. Poe then tells the tale of the deterioration and consequent fall of the last two members of this family line - Roderick and Madeline (Hildegard Watson). In the film, Watson and Weber intentionally let the camera tell its own story, as opposed to Poe, who strained the tale through the perspective of the puzzled narrating traveller. Thus the viewer is presented to this triangle of characters: the narrator – Roderick – Madeline. The *Doppelgänger* theme appears in the book, especially when, in the opening paragraph, we read about the reflection of the house in the tarn, and a “striking similitude between the brother and the sister” when Madeline “dies” (fig. 17).



Figure 17. *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Thematically, the story is not only considered to be a masterwork of Gothic literature, but it also, when adapted to a film, helped to establish the Gothic elements that would later be deployed in *noir* productions: the crumbling haunted mansion gives form to the feelings of terror, doom, and guilt of the main characters (in *The Spiral Staircase*, for example). The whole space has almost no reality beyond their assortment of states of schizophrenia, restlessness, and fear, and yet the shots of collapsing walls, stairs, and twisted corridors, manage to echo the characters’ sins. Indeed, the scaring results of the curse reach their peak when the “traveller” turns up at the Usher mansion and finds that the sibling residents are living under a strange family curse. Roderick has (unintentionally) caused the death of his sister, puts her in a coffin, and stubbornly tries to resurrect her spirit. The filmic devices used are related to the ones we see in *film noir*. For example, the

titlecard when the film opens alerts us to the theme of mental collapse, the impact of psychoanalysis, the demented *mise-en-scène*, and the lighting for dramatic effect.

From the camera's position, the Usher mansion, at least from the inside, is extraordinarily visualised. The vast gloomy spaces of the mansion with its dark corners, the wind blowing threateningly through the windows, become the central space of the film. After all, "Roderick Usher, his sister Madeline, and the house all shared one common soul", says the author in his book. Indeed, it is visually in my opinion that the film excels since it manages through photography, camera prisms and multiple exposures to show the altered mental state of the characters, with a sense of cosmic anguish and dementia.

Some of the key stylistics techniques used by Watson and Weber in this film reveal the immediate influence of Robert Wiener's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or Murnau's *Nosferatu* from the German cinema, namely the theme of *Doppelgänger*²² or the puzzling montages using mirror effects and Expressionistic sets. In fact, the eccentric *mise-en-scène* projects a certain degree of narrative endorsement, however bizarrely, through its disconcerting visions, namely frames filled with optically colourful images of Madeline's undead face, or the excellent overlay of two shots of the same staircase in such a way so as to resemble some twisted cord of rope, and expressing the idea of the steps leading to the tomb.

Since most of the accounts of the origins of *film noir* have predominantly put the emphasis on the hard-boiled tradition and its male-centredness on the detective-hero, this chapter on Gothic Romance aims to show the Gothic legacy in *noir* Hollywood productions. At a time when female audiences were increasing, the Hollywood heads of production knew how to take advantage of this emergent form in the American forties. The first really successful Gothic *noir* was Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). The film was based on a Daphne du Maurier novel and was produced by David O. Selznick, who

²² Traditionally, *Doppelgänger* has come to designate any double or look-alike of a person, a shadow self that is believed to accompany every person, but normally somebody evil or the bearer of bad omen, like death. The topic of the *Doppelgänger* was also central to the German cinema, as I will show in the next chapter. In *film noir*, many productions concentrated on the doublings of characters, like Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), Siodmak's *Dark Mirror* (1946), or Reinhardt's *The Guilty* (1947). Interestingly, these "double" characters are all family-related: uncle/niece; identical twins; two sisters, respectively. Some of these *noirs* examples are discussed next.

believed the project would be well-received considering the prior success of Orson Welles's radio adaptation of 1938.²³

Rebecca creates a threatening atmosphere surrounding the courtship and marriage of a young woman, Mrs de Winter (Joan Fontaine), to an imposingly temperamental aristocrat widower, Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier). Once settled in his gigantic mansion, the shy and naïve bride feels fear and pain from the implied “presence” and memories of the first Mrs de Winter, Rebecca, deceased in a boating accident. She is tormented by Rebecca's mean-spirited housekeeper, Mrs Danvers (Judith Anderson), whose loyalty, even after the woman's death, remains absolute, perpetrating her memory and allowing it to haunt the whole house. Her real character (and the secret of Rebecca's death) only become clear towards the end of the film. There is a play in the entire film around the revealing and concealing of the woman in the past – Rebecca – that is maintained through an enticing trail of visual clues. The letter “R” of her signature opens the film and is present on most of the domestic items and personal possessions that the heroine touches.

Rebecca uses a female voiceover, that of the second wife, who goes without a Christian name for the oneiric opening sequence. The film opens with that line: “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again”, pronounced by the woman dreaming about her return to her former mansion called Manderley, de Winter's cliffside Cornwall estate, now a totally burnt out and ruined place. We are then sent on this emotional excursion as her story unfolds in flashback about the mysteries of the forbidding mansion and the dark secrets of Rebecca's death (fig. 18). Stylistically, the film relies very much on *mise-en-scène* and camera movement, especially the low-angle shot, to accentuate the fears and fantasies of the new wife, who eventually learns that her husband did not love his former wife, an unkind and egoistical woman. Rebecca's power to haunt the inhabitants of Manderley is achieved through her invisibility. Tania Modleski states that the way the character appears in the film does not follow the usual representational conventions of the Gothic female, where “typically, a shot of a woman is followed by a shot of a man – a surrogate for the male spectator – looking at her” (Modleski 1988:52):

²³ The producer David O. Selznick sent a transcript of the broadcast to Hitchcock. “If we do in motion pictures as faithful a job as Welles did on the radio,” Selznick wrote, “we are likely to have the same success the book had and the same success that Welles had.”

In *Rebecca* the beautiful, desirable woman is not only never sutured in as object of the look, not only never made a part of the film's field of vision, she is actually posited within the diegesis as all-seeing – as for example when Mrs Danvers asks the terrified heroine if she thinks the dead come back to watch the living and says that she sometimes thinks Rebecca has come back to watch the new couple together. (Modleski 1988:52)



Figure 18. Rebecca

In the case of *Rebecca*, her narrative presence is over-determined by the persistent conversations about her by the other characters. As Modleski notes, she “lurks in the blind space of the film (...) but (...) her space, Manderley, remains unconquered by man” (Modleski 1988:53). The questions of identification (or over-identification in *Rebecca*) and recognition are part of the suspenseful mystery that usually involve a heroine in the Gothic romances (since heroes must either be mysterious or of a suspicious nature). In romantic suspense stories, we normally see both the hero and the heroine working together so as to catch the criminal or the culprit (like in *The 39 Steps* (1935)). These Gothic novels, however, are female-centred and so she normally works alone as she cannot trust the male character or, when in love with the hero, it takes nearly until the end for the heroine to find out whether he is of good character or if he has been involved in some heinous crime. The element of mistrust is at the centre of the mystery and we very often find the heroine either

becoming obsessed by the desperate desire to know her husband's secret or terrorised for money or for sex, making her feel helpless or confused and frightened. Moreover, she usually has the feeling that the past keeps catching up with her, and throwing a shadow over any prospect she might have for happiness and stability.

From this angle, feminist criticism also reports some key issues related to the questions of identification and recognition and images of femininity within the text in the female Gothic films. It is argued by feminists that the Gothic heroine lacks independence or narrative agency, which is accentuated by these issues of recognition and consequent lack of identity and through the use of multiple (and alterable) images of femininity within the text. In addition, the female Gothic bears a political charge which is demonstrated, for example, in the middle part of *Rebecca*, which deals with her investigation. The film can also be interpreted as another version of the defeat of patriarchy by a patriarchal order. However, there is also the position of other feminists, like that of Maria LaPlace, who sees the female Gothic cycle as a new change in the social and cultural meanings. Moreover, the Gothic cycle's female authorial origins and its marketing placed it, she says, within "a circuit of female discourse (...) *by and for women*" (in Hanson 2007:66). Therefore, she concludes that these new contexts and the female Gothic's divergent mood of romance allowed Hollywood to explore the Gothic film from the woman's perspective.

Whether the characterisation of the female Gothic heroine squares with feminist criticism (particularly feminist theories of the visual and identification), the conflicting attitude that exists towards the female expressed in *film noir* is relevant and needs to be emphasised. The domestic woman of *Pitfall*, for example, is sexually nonthreatening, but she is tedious when compared to the thrilling (but dangerous) *femme fatale* played by Lizabeth Scott. In both types of narratives, the Gothic romance and *film noir*, the stability of the couple and their union seem to be at issue. None of these types really portray the institution of the family, the concrete representation of traditional values, and as a working social unit. In most of these cases, in fact, relations are either not typical or are based on the absence of a family. In the case of the Gothic heroine she appears to have a distinct responsibility, that of exposing and exploring the prevalence of feminine ideals, the way that they are understood by other women, and their role in identity formation.

What is also significant about the Gothic film cycle is the thematic and visual impact it had on the *noir* narrative, and its resonances for the socio-cultural contexts of the

forties. Thematically, the representation of the woman and the trope of the returning past in the Gothic woman's film is also to be found in *film noir* (in *Laura*, for example, the heroine, who is thought to have been murdered, is "brought back" to life and subjected to the work of investigation by the film's detective / hero). Visually, the legacy of the Gothic films is passed on to *film noir* in terms of the obscure lighting / chiaroscuro and its specific architecture and sense of space.

Therefore, it is only natural that the Gothic cycle, as an unstable genre, spread its features into various modes, among them the Victorian novel, novels for women, short stories and operas, and later in the forties, into the *noir* movement. For this reason, many *noirs* are also referred to as Gothic *noir* productions, such as *Gaslight* (1944), directed by George Cukor and starring Ingrid Bergman, Charles Boyer and Joseph Cotten, or another fine example of American Gothic-*noir* filmmaking, Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase*, with its stylistic dichotomy between the period film generic elements and *noir* features (this film is further discussed in Part IV). In addition, the Gothic legacy is often overlooked in its influence in favour of the hard-boiled tradition analysed earlier, which is centred on the male hero. These films bear a close resemblance to hard-boiled *noirs* in both styles and themes. The major difference is, however, that the Gothic *noirs* were specifically targeted at a female audience, and they have as a central axis an imperiled femininity, as seen above, while the hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* that continued into the fifties were dominated by the male-orientated crime plots.

Another *noir* production that borders on the Gothic is *The House on Telegraph Hill* (1951) directed by Robert Wise and produced by Robert Bassler. The film is considered *noir* for its photography (by Lucien Ballard) and thematically for the fatalistically romantic narration of Victoria Kowelska (Valentina Cortesa). At the end of the war, a German concentration camp inmate Victoria Kowelska assumes the identity of Karin de Nakova so she can be allowed to emigrate to the United States. Once she gets to San Francisco, she claims to be the mother of the child, Chris, who lives with his wealthy great-aunt. Before getting there, the aunt dies and, maintaining Karin's identity, she inherits the estate, which includes a mansion atop Telegraph Hill. In the meantime, she falls in love with the boy's trustee, Alan Spender (Richard Basehart), and they marry. Shortly after, however, a set of inexplicable accidents occur and Victoria discovers that the motive behind his amorous attentions was to assume control of the estate. He tries to poison her with the help of the

governess, Margaret (Fay Baker), but eventually he is the one to be killed by the poison and Margaret is sent to jail.

With its sophisticated construction and creepy setting, along with the technique of flashback (Victoria's story is told retrospectively), the film displays the Gothic features mentioned above: the hints of sexual abnormality, the interference of an inscrutable past (when Victoria sifts through Alan's past to discover the apparent charmer is a murderous monster), and the seclusion and ultimate entrapment of the heroine in the old mansion (contrasting with the bright San Francisco daylight and the busy streets of the city). The climactic scene is then transformed into something threatening and real: when Alan and Victoria are face-to-face in the child's playhouse, we learn that he had pushed her and made her fall from the hill. All these elements touch upon conventions found in the *noir*-related period film.

In conclusion, the themes in the Gothic romance, namely those related to psychic illnesses, fear of the supernatural and paranoia were extensively used by Hollywood in the forties as a sub-branch of the "woman's films", aimed at the vastly more numerous female audiences. But again, this classification of "woman's films" reinforces my argument that film genres are not so easily definable. Trying to fit films tidily into genres may be misleading, and some films that may be classified as "Female Gothic"²⁴ in this case can simply be left out. Therefore I argue that, within certain historical and cultural contexts, film production inscribes a certain instability in a cycle of films, normally starting with the success of a film or films and leading to a categorisation of genres. *Film noir* is, in this regard, no exception. While some critics were pointing up some of the films that belonged to the invented genre "*film noir*", one might speculate what elements are necessary for a film to be fitted in this category, and what are those that foreclose the possibility of a film being considered a *noir* production. Some of these rejected films usually had women as the main protagonists, but then conflicts arose regarding the possible classification as *film noir*, as indeed the films chosen insist upon the role of men as the main protagonists to the screen.

²⁴ The term was actually coined by Ellen Moers in 1977 as an attempt to come up with a different reasoning about the Gothic novel as a literary genre. She questions the link between the Gothic settings and the female sexuality, but for this purpose, the term she has created shows that even within the Gothic novel, the generic categorization comes into conflict.

To complicate this matter further, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* launched a new discussion about the difficulty of separating genres. The film is – correctly, in my opinion – seen as the first Gothic *noir*, but also as a Female Gothic film, since it has a style and context of production which are common to both categories. Some maintain that the only thing that distinguishes the film from *noir* is precisely the fact that *Rebecca* gives the central role of the protagonist to a woman. However, *film noir* does not at all times deal with characters that are involuntarily trapped in a difficult situation, striving against random cruel fate, and usually doomed. Or that all *noir* plots always involve a hard-boiled detective or a disenchanted male, who, because of greed or sexual attraction (to a *femme fatale*), commits violent acts and crimes, and in the end both are either punished or simply killed for their actions. Gothic *noir* films adopt many of the same insecure position in relation to society's injustices, as the male-centred dramas of classic *noir*. In the chapter that I devote to the *homme fatal*, I will also refer to the expressive elements that disclose and dramatise the gender conflicts and dynamics at the heart of the *noir* film cycle. Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* will also be an essential film to demonstrate that Gothic *noir* needs to be analysed from both a technical and a feminist point of view.

In any case, the application of the term genre seems to encapsulate a group of films under the same designation of "*film noir*", excluding the possibility of any variation, or possible connectedness between the narratives. I consider this later and propose that maybe the best hypothesis is to avoid setting such rigid boundaries for *film noir*, though I am aware that from an academic and scholarly point of view it is helpful to have some categorisation of this kind.

1.4 German Expressionist Influences

Not one important symptom of the post-war years is missing. Stock exchanges maneuvers, occultist charlatanism, prostitution, and over-eating, smuggling, hypnosis and counterfeiting, expressionism, violence and murder! There is no purpose, no logic in this demonic behavior of a dehumanized mankind – everything is a game.
(Scheunemann 2003:10)

It is not accidental that much debate goes around the issue of which films or groups of films are part of the “Expressionist art movement”. So there again – though perhaps not posed so insistently as the question which films can be considered *noir* – one of the leading questions that is often asked is whether one should refer to, for example, F.W. Murnau as an Expressionist or a “realist” director. No doubt, when discussing Expressionist cinema one has to think of a definite period, and one that is identified as a fundamental part of the commotion of that period, as part of the frenetic extremism of the time.

The quote above is in point of fact addressed to the film by Fritz Lang called *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, 1922), seen by many as the one which established Lang’s reputation as a director. In fact, the movie is more than a melodramatic story about a strange professional gambler; it turned out to be a metaphor for a Germany that was just as strange and disastrously drawn towards fascism. Many contemporary critics, like James Naremore and Marc Silberman, also endorse the realism of the portrait of high society the film shows, serving as an authentic document of that time, in a world given over to immorality and corruption. The film was much acclaimed in the press:

The world which opens up before our eyes in this film is the world in which we all live. Only it is condensed, exaggerated in detail, concentrated into essentials, all its ingredients throbbing with the feverish breath of those years, hovering between crisis and convalescence, leading somnambulistically just over the brink, in the search for a bridge that will lead over the abyss. This gambler, Dr. Mabuse, was not yet possible in 1910; he will, perhaps - one is tempted to say hopefully - no longer be possible in 1930. But for the years around 1920 he represents a larger than life-size portrait, is almost a symbol, at least a symptom. Mankind, decimated and

trampled under by war and revolution, takes its revenge for years of suffering and misery by eating its lusts and pursuing pleasure.²⁵

Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler is an invigorating modernist nightmare, almost an allegory as the quote suggests, reminding us of Bertolt Brecht's distressing plays, but also working as a reminder of Lang's position in regards to how much Expressionism had influenced his work stylistically. Among other authors, Lotte Eisner confirmed the Expressionistic mood existing in the film, from the lighting effects, to the "Expressionistic gestures," "Expressionistic flavors", even to the "realist Expressionism" of Fritz Lang. Sudendorf maintains that "Lang adopted all the elements of Expressionism he could use in the visualization of his ideas" (Sudendorf 1993:96). Apart from these stylistic elements, there is also in the film a judicious conversation between Count Told and Dr. Mabuse which to a great degree displays Lang's indebtedness to the Expressionist art movement: "What do you think of expressionism, Doctor?," to which Mabuse responds: "Expressionism is just a game (...). But why ever not? – Everything is just a game today !"

Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler is one of the films that best captures the protean decadence of Weimar cinema in a nation gripped essentially by a terrible doubt about how it could possibly reassert itself after the destruction of war and the failures of its authoritarian past. One has to go back to the earlier years of the Weimar cinema (1919-1933) to understand some of the struggles and arguments advanced in order to make cinema respectable, but also to make it competitive in the battles for national and international audiences and markets. As Elsaesser notes, "the films of the German fantastic cinema thus seem to encode in their encounter with the social reality of the Weimar Republic (...)" (Elsaesser 2003:67), and not just from a historical perspective. It has also to be seen as a whole and as a distinct style of artistic production not only in film, but also in other arts, since Expressionism as a cross-cultural movement embraces all sorts of arts, from music and painting to sculpture, architecture and design to literature and theatre.

The objective of this chapter is neither to solve the problematic stated above, that is, the attempt to place the films in the context of the Expressionistic art movement, nor to resolve the "great confusion" that has befallen "the definition of Expressionist cinema".²⁶

²⁵ In <http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/filmnotes/fns00n9.html>

²⁶ In his article on "Expressionism and Film", Werner Sudendorf refers to two studies (one by Rudolf Kurtz, called *Expressionismus und Film* ("Expressionism and Film", 1926) and another more recent one, titled *Expressionismus als Filmgattung* ("Expressionism as a Film Genre" (1992) by Leonardo Quaresima), both of

Rather, I propose to analyse how these films lay claim to the title of Expressionist cinema, how they entered the public sphere of the early twenties as a form of social relation where narratives and images helped to displace the traumas brought about by inflation, unemployment and political turbulence. Ultimately, it is this growing social reality of Weimar culture, the way the films were produced as society recovered from crisis that I want to discuss now, bearing in mind that Germany's Golden Twenties became part of and launched a new culture of consumption, which, among other things, changed the expectations that the female public had of these films, as Thomas Elsaesser notes:

Social rise continued to be a film subject – if anything, more than ever – but in comedies, musicals and revue films. Mobility no longer needed the fantastic to hide from itself its bad conscience, nor the anxious male and his dummy-double to warn about the sorcerer's apprentice playing with fire as he tried to be the alchemist of class and status. Now it was enough that the movie stars modelled their erotic mores, along with the clothes – and that the man of her dreams was up on the screen to fan the flames of passion. After all, Weimar cinema knew all about mobility: not least thanks to inflation, it had itself made the steepest social rise of all. (Elsaesser 2000:68)

Towards the end of WWI and in the period immediately following it, the German government set up, funded and restricted to within Germany itself all film production. By having all the entertainment internally produced, it was hoped that this would revitalise its ailing film industry, and movies soon began to reflect a desire to escape, even into horror, from the dreadful effects of the economic crisis. Expressionist films relied heavily on symbolism and artistic distortion rather than stark realism to tell their stories. I will next focus on the aesthetic aspects of these films, pursuing in particular the development of the precise expressionist features of films of the twenties.

Barry Salt, a film historian and author of *Moving into Pictures*, tries to “salvage the concept of Expressionism” as a distinct style of artistic production in various other arts as well as in film. He confines the number of films that could lay claim to the title of Expressionist cinema to six films made between 1919 and 1924, which is roughly the date,

which in his view led to the “great confusion” regarding “the definition of Expressionist cinema”, conferring most of the blame on Lotte Eisner's book *The Haunted Screen*. In *Expressionism and Film: The Testament of Dr Caligari*, he wrote: “[The confusion] was probably initiated by the subtitle of Lotte H. Eisner's history of cinema, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, which first appeared in French in 1952. Suddenly, all the classic German films made during the Weimar Republic were termed ‘Expressionist’” (in Behr 1993:91). As said, for the purpose of this dissertation, this issue will not be further discussed here.

he says, when Expressionism ended, bringing to a close, therefore, certain phenomena in style and motifs in the films of the Weimar Republic. These are *Der Student von Prag* (*The Student of Prague*), which was first released in 1913, *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1919), *Genuine* (1920), *Von Morgens bis Mitternachts* (*From Morn to Midnights*, 1920), *Torgus* (1921), *Raskolnikov* (1923), and *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (*Waxworks*, 1924).²⁷ The author argues that these films display the Expressionist traits present in painting and drama, the main criteria put forward to justify such a selection. In contrast, I would not include Hanns Kobe's *Torgus* in this list as I do not consider it to be totally Expressionistic. It lacks for me the internal stylistic coherence that is so particular to this artistic movement, or to be more precise it does not have the kind of *Stimmung* that I will be commenting on later, which makes Expressionism easier to pin down. Rather it concentrates on the character and the plot, which, in turn, are too plain and easy to follow. The only "golem-like" part of the film is actually *Torgus*, the coffin-maker, who keeps Anna sequestered with his mother until the birth of the child.

Some consensus is nonetheless reached among the various authors, such as Thomas Eisner, Tom Gunning and David Bordwell, who have investigated the origins of works that belong to that particular style. Directed by Robert Wiene in 1919, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is nearly always brought forward as the most renowned and influential film of that era. The film narrates the fascinating and frightening encounter of two students with Dr. Caligari (Werner Krauss), a hypnotist with a twisted mind, and his victim, a somnambulist named Cesare (Conrad Veidt), who carries out the doctor's evil orders. The characters move about in claustrophobic studio settings, in a hallucinatory landscape of illogically-shaped mountains and fields and places with the most bizarre forms and angles. This symbolic commixture of imaginary fractured shapes and chaotic lines contribute to the disorder inside the lives of the characters, turning them literally into a madman's nightmare (fig. 19).

²⁷ This list of films is part of a rather controversial article written by Salt titled "From Caligari to Who?" and which was published in the *Sight and Sound* magazine, vol. 48, n°2, spring 1979, p. 119. In it, the British Cinema historian intends to deliver a clearer definition of the notion "Expressionist film". The majority of the text is actually a fierce criticism of Siegfried Kracauer's thesis.



Figure 19. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

The film concludes with its narrator, Francis (Friedrich Feher), lit in chiaroscuro mode so as to subjectively resemble a deranged character being sent to the asylum and discredited as a lunatic. The distorted lines and perverted forms that are found in this type of film were thus a way for the Expressionist artist to put across violently mental states, representing alienation and despair, fragmentation and dislocation; in short, the “irrationality” of modern Germany. In the other arts, especially in painting, the Expressionist artist showed his rage, transforming inner demons into images of tumult and austerity to convey the same idea. In fact, the work of Expressionist artists - from poets, dramatists, and painters to filmmakers – contained not just similar features but also similar intentions, those of showing disdain for oppressive bourgeois society and industrial capitalism. Sheppard mentions that the Expressionist artist:

(...) inclined to see himself as a prophetic visionary who was called to explode conventional reality, to break through the crust that had formed around men’s psyches in order to give uninhibited *expression* to the energies there imprisoned. Unable to represent, describe or imitate the ‘fallen’ conventional world, the visionary artist of Expressionism aimed to abstract the objects of the everyday from their normal context, and recombine them into radiant beacons of a lost inner *Geist*. (Sheppard 1976:277)

These early Expressionist films, with their anguished protagonists trying to escape from a disordered society and their stylised urban settings, wielded a profound influence on the subject matter as well as the visual forms on the American *film noir*. As many German directors fled to Hollywood from an ever evolving social nightmare, they brought with them the special sensibility that flowed throughout their early work. Many of their productions would then have Expressionist traits, though they were very much adjusted to the taste of American producers and American audiences. Expressionist elements in *film noir* are to be sure not as pronounced as in German films. The world of *noir* is not twisted to the degree that it is in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (in fact, rarely does Hollywood cater for such a painterly aesthetics); but the obscurantism of the characters' mental activity, their paranoia as well as their amnesia are part of an identifiable shift that affected American cinema, regarded by as a reflection of the various social and cultural changes occurring in the US during the forties. The films contain a battery of Expressionist motifs that functions as a kind of visual italics, supplying mood and texture and elevating the stories from their bland, everyday contexts.

A consistent visible trace element of Expressionism throughout *noir* is the nightmare sequence, where for a few moments, in a dream interlude, a film becomes overtly subjective, entering into the hero's consciousness to portray its disorderliness and fragmentation. As discussed on p. 45, one of the earliest and best of these Expressionist nightmares occurs in Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet*. Taken as one of the productions that had a major impact in launching the *noir* cycle, the film is a captivating fusion of the hard-boiled tradition and a form of muted Expressionism. It is not just the psychotic disorder characterised essentially by delusions of persecutions or fear of living in the world they find themselves in, but also their amnesia that lead the *noir* protagonists to enter a world of forgetfulness and total mental prostration.

Another example of this German Expressionist influence on a *noir* production is to be found in Arthur Ripley's *The Chase* (1946 - see p. 60). The film presents Chuck Scott (Robert Cummings), a WWII veteran who becomes an impoverished wanderer anguished by mysterious dreams, as someone who finds a wallet and decides to return it to the home of an affluent Miami businessman Eddie Roman (Steve Cochran), who happens to be a vicious gangster. Scott is then recruited as the new chauffeur for Roman as a token of his (supposed) appreciation for so much honesty. It does not take long for Scott to discover

that he is involved with a crook. When he falls in love with Roman's lady, Lorna (Michèle Morgan), things get complicated and the chase begins immediately but mostly in Chuck's tortured mind. This bizarre chase truly is about a self lost in amnesia and delusion, a motif common in many of Cornell Woolrich's dark and oppressive characters adapted for American *noir*.

Lady in the Lake, of which Robert Montgomery is not only the director but he also plays detective Phillip Marlowe through the agency of the camera lens, is the epitome of the subjective camera (p. 45). The visual trickery of this subjective-camera experiment was considered at that time an important innovation (even if it did not fully meet Montgomery's expectations). Together with *Murder, My Sweet*, this Marlowe film introduced some stylistic and narrative techniques which would become more and more influential in subsequent *noir* films: notably first-person voiceover narration and flashbacks.

From the illustrations above, it is possible to notice that a good number of *noir* films reflect the disillusioned desires and active fears of their protagonists in the physical world. The subjective emphasis found in these *noir* productions, through dream sequences or visual traits, betrays its inspiration in the German style and simultaneously bears the influence of the first-person narration and flashbacks so commonplace in the crime novels of the hard-boiled writers, as seen in earlier chapters. In short, the extremely calculated and carefully composed *mise-en-scène* that was anti-naturalistic found in Expressionist cinema was also used in *film noir*. In addition, Expressionism's narrative patterns also influenced *film noir* - the complexity of narration, that Thomas Elsaesser stresses, was indeed another common major characteristic to both filmic movements, which cultivated decentred narratives, placed in frame tales or doubled stories, voiceovers and flashback narrations.

So far I have acknowledged how Expressionism (essentially a movement of artists and intellectuals against bourgeois values) functioned as an attempt to convey an underlying truth through the distortions and abstractions of external forms, as a challenge to express a character's subjectivity, and often demented individuality. For that purpose, Paul Wegener and Stellan Rye's *Der Student von Prag* (*The Student of Prague*), which was first released in 1913, but remade in Expressionist style in 1926, is another important film and part of the list above of seven films presented by Barry Salt. The movie uses the Expressionist device of the double or the *Doppelgänger* and it tells the story of a young

student, Balduin (Paul Wegener himself), who sells his mirror image for the love of a beautiful countess (Grete Berger) to a sorcerer, Dr. Scapinelli (John Gottowt), who turns that image into the young man's evil, murderous second self. *The Student of Prague* and the topic of "double" has always been a particularly fascinating motif for cinema.²⁸

The techniques of visual representation employed in this film are good examples of Expressionism's ability to generate *Stimmung*,²⁹ to reflect the instability and ambiguity of individual subjectivity or identity, which find an echo in *film noir*. Through the use of the mask and double exposure of the film strip, the directors of this film developed a method for enhancing visual perception in cinema or, rather, one can say that with *The Student of Prague* they invented a new way of suggesting identity through photographic technique. The trope would in fact be used in *noir* productions, such as Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* in which the British director introduces the sweet-natured young Charlie (Teresa Wright) who also has a "second-self" that digs into the darker areas of her mind making her tough-minded enough to contemplate the elimination of her sanguinary Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten). Their common name cements their underlying similarity.

According to Thomas Elsaesser, the German influence is also observed in *film noir* at the level of the so-called *Straßenfilme* (street films) in which a cultural German form is replicated in the mean streets of Chicago, New York, San Francisco or Los Angeles. In fact, *noir* productions abound in the *topos* of the street, especially those of the cities (and everything that is associated with them: sidewalks, bridges, subway tunnels, docks and piers, etc) and in combination with the lighting effects, they work as symbols for and major elements in the plot or in characterising the *noir* inhabitants' inner lives. Initially, the street films were meant to serve a specific social purpose in the German film industry. German city dwellers were examples of *Aufklärungsfilme* with the purpose of enlightening the public in general as to the potential dangers of the street. Presumably concerned with social problems arising from poverty and unemployment, the *Straßenfilm* is at the same time fascinated by the underworld and illicit sexuality, recurrently connecting female sexuality with criminality. Paul Monaco points out that the street in German productions of the period was represented as "dark, gloomy and dangerous (...) the site of crimes, where low life flourishes. More specifically, the street is the place in which order breaks down unless

²⁸ Up to this day in fact, if one takes David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988) or John Woo's *Face/Off* (1997) as a more recent example.

²⁹ The emanation or generated mood evoked from an object filmed.

a figure of authority maintains it” (Monaco 1976:137-8). Just as in various *noir* films in which the word “street” appears in the title (see p. 411) and takes on a particular spatial and emotional dimension in the characters’ lives, the power that these films of the street had on the German public partook of an ambiguous glamour as much as it served the ends of bourgeois revulsion.

The street film was also part of what is usually recognised as *Neue Sachlichkeit*, a “New Objectivity” which arose in the early twenties as an outgrowth of Expressionism. This art movement came to an end in 1933 with the fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler to power. This “New Dispassion”, as the movement was termed, intended to show the social realities of contemporary German life, its hardships and again illustrates the life of the street. This cycle of films started with films also with the word “street” in their titles, like Karl Grune’s *Die Straße* (*The Street*, 1923) or G.W. Pabst’s *Die freudlose Gasse* (*The Joyless Street*, 1923). The former is a silent film recounting the life of a respectable but bored middle class man who leaves his sober life for the city streets at night where he expects to have adventures but instead gets into trouble. The latter film (also silent) is a perfect example of the “new objectivity”, in which Greta Garbo incidentally plays an effective role as a young woman trying to make ends meet during the difficult economic years of hyperinflation.

To a certain extent, one might affirm that this type of film - showing the chiaroscuro of the urban street as a place where violence subsists, casting underworld characters (black marketers, gamblers and conmen, and above all, the *femme fatale* who emerges as seducer and provoker of illicit desire) – aroused such a racy image of urban deterioration that it might be to thwart the original intention of these films to be “educational” or “enlightening”. However, in my opinion, the purpose of these “new” films is to show that although the hero breaks away from the welfare of a traditional home, in search of adventure on the street (seen as a world of temptation and peril), he usually returns to a conventional life. Some other titles might be mentioned here, like Joe May’s *Asphalt* (1928), produced by Erich Pommer,³⁰ in which a naïve policeman (Gustav Fröhlich) from a good family falls in love with a prostitute, Else (Betty Amann), who also has stolen a precious stone from a jewellery store; or Bruno Rahn’s *Dirnentragödie*

³⁰ Erich Pommer was responsible for producing several films by directors including Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau, as is explained later in this chapter. Moreover, this Joe May 1929 drama provides a “stylised look at Berlin nightlife” and was an inspiration for many *noir* films to follow.

(*Tragedy of the Street*, 1927, aka *Women without Men*), a drama about an ageing prostitute, Auguste (Asta Nielsen), who attempts to settle down with a young man who has broken with his parents and ventured into her demimonde. This rouses the jealousy of her pimp, who then deliberately uses a younger prostitute to separate them and so Auguste plans murder in revenge. As one can see, these heady stories of love and violence hardly endorse a simple moral.

One later representative example (often seen as the penultimate street film) of a movie in which Expressionist subjectivity is reserved for culminating scenes where the characters shrink back in humiliation and repugnance is Murnau's *Der Letzte Mann* (*The Last Laugh*, 1924). The old man (Emil Jannings), who for so long has been so proud of his position as a doorman and even prouder to be wearing his golden braids and a brass buttoned uniform outside the Hotel Atlantic, is demoted because of his old age to a lowly toilet attendant. When the hotel manager comes and strips the pleading doorkeeper of his uniform, the viewer feels that the protagonist is losing his carefully constructed identity and as a result his life is suddenly devoid of any significance. This demotion gains darker tones in the film to show a man who now feels banished by everybody, losing all his self-esteem (fig. 20). The city itself works as a strong visual element towering above him, showing him sink deeper and deeper, with strange shapes and objects (cruel laughing faces and ghoulish masks) all moving in front of him to accentuate his despair and alienation. In his nightmarish visions (shot in a vividly Expressionist style with distorting lenses and canted angles), the glass revolving door of the hotel that had been the centre of his life (separating the chaos of the outside from the scintillating ambience of the lobby) now appears as an enormous totem of his ruin.



Figure 20. *The Last Laugh*

The influence of lighting codes in German Expressionism reinforces our implicit understanding of the characters' thinking in *film noir*. These codes are particularly important and set a stylistic precedent for expressing innermost conflicts and obsessions and repressed violence and vulnerability. The type of irrational violence - mixed with strong doses of horror so appropriate to that period - is to be found in productions already mentioned, such as *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (*Waxworks*) and *Nosferatu* (1922). Both the young poet (William Dieterle) and the motivated young broker, Thomas Hutter (Gustav von Wangenheim), respectively, play the roles of panicking men, manipulated this way and that by older figures who try to control them in what becomes a love triangle.

Different *noir* productions contain the same love triangle trope, such as in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*. Both are taken from James M. Cain's novels of treachery and murder which, as we know, became the *noir* films' ability to depict *amour fou*, that is, love relationships which go beyond the bounds of the normal. Likewise, both productions disclose *femmes fatales*, Cora Smith (Lana Turner) and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck). Whereas the former is helpless and feels trapped in her marriage to Nick (Cecil Kellaway), Phyllis is much more manipulative, constructing her

plots with calculating precision. German cinema also featured classic *femmes fatales* before 1940s *film noir*. Georg Wilhelm Pabst's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora's Box*, 1929) casts Louise Brooks in the role of Lulu, an enticing and free-spirited girl who seems to have all men fall under her domineering and yet somehow also naive spell. Even highly respectable Dr Schön (Fritz Kortner) and his son Alwa (Francis Lederer) find it difficult to get away from the allure of this *femme fatale* and are drawn into an inescapable spiral into tragedy. The whole film is shot deploying a sensual and Expressionist décor (notable work by cinematographer Günther Krampf) so as to accentuate male sexual obsession and entrapment.

Another example that immediately comes to mind is Joseph von Sternberg's *Der Blaue Engel* (*The Blue Angel*, 1930), starring Emil Jannings in the role of Immanuel Rath, the middle-aged Professor who becomes infatuated with a nightclub dancer, Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich). One night he happens to go to "The Blue Angel" club where Lola works, and inevitably falls in love with her. In my opinion, this film bears striking similarities with Lang's *Scarlet Street*, analysed in detail in Part IV. In both, conventional men fall for beautiful women, Kitty (Joan Bennett) and Lola, respectively, and are reduced to figures of ridicule by these cold-blooded and manipulative *femmes fatales*. Immanuel Rath falls short of his strong beliefs and is laughed at behind his back. In both films, the men are bedazzled by the women's allure (Kitty first appears in her transparent plastic raincoat like a bonbon in cellophane; Lola dresses in showbiz outfits, exposing her shoulders and thighs, merely the promise of sexual availability), and with an energy that makes the men's fall not only believable but inevitable. Finally both directors convey the attitude that those who live by their imagination can become helpless victims of it in a cruelly realistic world.

Considered by many to be the first *film noir*, Boris Ingster's *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) demonstrates the most overt influences yet of German Expressionism on American *film noir*. This unheralded B-film serves as a good way to show Weimar cinema taking root in America. Firstly, we have Peter Lorre, as the stranger, the psychopathic male who brutally throat-slashes his victims, and newspaper reporter Mike Ward (John McGuire) who is the star witness at the trial of an innocent taxi driver, Joe Briggs (Elisha Cook, Jr.). Frank Partos writes a script which stresses paranoia and claustrophobia, especially when we see the stranger lurking in the shadows on the stairwell of the building

where Mark lives (see fig. 41) or when we see images of Mike falling asleep in his chair and dreaming of being accused of the murder of his neighbour, Albert Meng (Charles Halton). In his dream, he is strapped into the electric chair and, at the moment of his execution, Meng appears, cruelly laughing, as in Murnau's film, while he watches Ward's execution. All these stylistic, narrative and visual *noir* elements are not only realised by strong performances from the main characters, but by the director and the art director (Van Nest Polglase) through the highly artificial *mise-en-scène* of a studio setting and the baroque photography of Nicholas Musuraca.

The narrative patterns of certain *noir* films, most notably *Stranger on the Third Floor*, find their antecedents in the German films of the twenties. The angst-ridden, convoluted narratives, the framing devices and *mise-en-abyme* in the films already mentioned, like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or *Waxworks*, are plausible examples for the flashback narration so common in forties *noir* (*Detour*; *Out of the Past*; *Criss Cross*). Some of the titles of the German films just referred to also offer good examples of the



Figure 21. ***M***

perverted and neurotic sex murderer like the one in Ingster's film: from Jack the Ripper in *Pandora's Box* to Lang's *M* (1931). *M* also stars Peter Lorre as Hans Beckert in the role of a serial killer who preys on children in 1930s Berlin and is often cited as the film which anticipated many essential features of the *noir* mood, mainly through its direction and stylised photography.³¹ As in Murnau's *The Last Laugh*, the Expressionist subjectivity and *mise-en-scène* are also symbolic of the reality of a country where the dark streets, the abandoned market area where the tormented man hides (fig. 21), the frames within the frame that seem to confine the character to corners, all reflect the child murderer's swelling disturbance and the fury of the mob which hunts him down.

In this chapter, I make the case that German Expressionism had a major influence on *film noir*'s arresting visual style and its pessimistic mood, but simultaneously I would like to argue that it was the influence of Weimar cinema as a whole, rather than just its Expressionist forms, that had profound, complex, and multifaceted effects on American cinema. Expressionism, no doubt, with its defining codes, especially at the level of lighting (with the celebrated *clair-obscur*, the oblique lighting, the callous, elongated shadows, severe and unusual camera-angling, the light playing on faces and creating their own psychologically charged environments, and so on) is acknowledged and paid a debt of gratitude to a large number of UFA cameramen and directors, like Carl Freund, Rudolph Maté, Theodor Sparkuhl, and Fritz Lang, among many others. It is at this level that one can perceive how influential German cinema was for *film noir*. A further citation of Paul Schrader in his "Notes on *Film Noir*" bears this out:

[W]hen, in the late forties, Hollywood decided to paint it black, there were no greater masters of chiaroscuro than the Germans. The influence of Expressionist lighting has always been just beneath the surface of Hollywood films, and it is not surprising, in film noir, to find it bursting out into full bloom. (...) On the surface the German Expressionist influence, with its reliance on artificial studio lighting, seems incompatible with postwar realism, with its harsh unadorned exteriors; but it is the unique quality of film noir that it was able to weld seemingly contradictory elements into a uniform style. (Schrader 1972:12)

³¹ Interesting enough, Joseph Losey created an exact remake of the Fritz Lang film in 1951, but of course putting it in an American context and certifying that the location would be appropriate for the story. Thus the film gains a new dimension and the tone of an American *film noir*. David Wayne plays the role of M, as the murderer, and his illness and perversion are unsettlingly explicit in this version, as it seems apparent that he gets a sexual thrill from the manipulation of the children's shoelaces and the clay doll.

The connection between German Expressionist cinema and American *film noir* was not only to be discernible and joined “into a uniform style,” as Schrader points out, but also via the creation of an embracing *Umwelt*, a kind of intimate environment. In short, it was through a visual style that used chiaroscuro and fragmented camera angles as its main visual lexicon and which would years later influence the *noir* iconography. In conjunction with the abovementioned *Stimmung*, it provided the emotional connection (and dilemma) existing between the objects and the subjects of the story.

1.5 French Poetic Realism

Poetic Realism (...) whether good or bad, gave glory to French cinema and was sold around the world. It has been imitated abroad but, God knows why, nobody makes this kind of movie better than the French. (Andrew 1995:3)

Born in the 1930s, the expression “Poetic Realism” fuses two concepts which can be considered contradictory: realism and poetry. Indeed, the designation “Poetic Realism” seems to spring from a network of influences, mostly literary (naturalism, populism), and from German Expressionism and the “Straßenfilm” mentioned in the earlier section. One can in fact speak of “realism” as many of the French film directors represented the social realities of an anxiety-ridden society in a world that was clearly getting out of hand. Their films would portray the life conditions of citizens living in poverty and crime or facing the harsh political and social situation of that time. Hence we see the street as the place of choice for poetic realism, rain-slicked as in *noir* films, and often snaking along the banks of the Seine reflecting the dark mood of dolefulness in fog and mist. This kind of décor and setting / lighting has received close critical and been found to be in harmony with the gloomy nights and shadows of the German cinema.

The term “Poetic Realism” was first employed in 1933 to give an idea of “a genre of urban drama, often set among the Paris proletariat or lower middle classes, with romantic / criminal narratives emphasising doom and despair. In these films, “poetry” and mystery are found in everyday objects and settings – hence the proletarian milieu” (Vincendeau 1992:54). This is one of the reasons why these films were also designated as *le fantastique social*, as they also depict the Popular Front (a consolidated party of the left) phenomenon and the texture of interwar period society. Poetry is present aesthetically within the narrative, which is heavily imbued with the notion of fatalism. The décors are very important and are all set in the studio, most of the time in tulle (a fine, often starched net of silk, rayon, or nylon, used especially for veils or gowns).

The French critics had already used the term “film noir” for the films made before the war. In fact, this cycle of films ranging from 1936 to 1939 was essentially made by the

team of Jacques Prévert (an eminent artist, writer, poet and scriptwriter) and director Marcel Carné. They produced seven films together, of which two are considered to be decisive in the decline of the Popular Front and of the desperation felt at the ineluctability of war : *Quai des Brumes* (*Port of Shadows*, 1938) and *Le Jour se Lève* (*Daybreak*, 1939).



Figure 22. *Quai des Brumes* (*Port of Shadows*)

The former is based on a novel by Pierre MacOrlan and casts Jean Gabin (one of the actors that came to represent the archetypal worker of prewar French society), Michel Simon and Michèle Morgan. In the film, Gabin plays the role of the exhausted Jean, a soldier who decides to desert from the French Army, rather hopelessly, and who has a hatred for almost everything, mostly guns and explosions. When he arrives at the fog-bound city of Le Havre, he is offered the possibility of changing his identity and sailing on one of the cargo ships at the port off to South America. Although the suggestion sounds appealing, he feels unenthusiastic since he is in love with a very young girl called Nelly

(Michèle Morgan), whose godfather Zabel (Michel Simon) oversees her romantic life very closely. Jean is determined to become the guardian of young Nelly, but life seems to take a turn for the worse when crook Zabel and a small-time gangster, Lucien (Pierre Brasseur), are in pursuit of a certain Maurice. In terms of the narrative, it seems that the main character is determined to tempt his already doomed fate at any cost. Stylistically too, the dark or low-lit scenes displaying totally abandoned streets (fig. 22) enhance the alienation of the central character from any social or intellectual order. The whole film is irremediably gloomy, offering a fascinating look at the provincial criminal underworld, and with fate having a different plan (Jean is unpredictably murdered at the end) for a charismatic and stoic man who just wanted another chance to make good in life. *Quai des Brumes* was the most successful French film released in 1938 and it was hugely appreciated in intellectual circles, both in England and in America.

The latter film, *Le Jour se Lève*, was written by Jacques Prévert and also stars Jean Gabin as François, an ordinary factory worker who barricades himself in his room (fig. 23) after having killed a man, Valentin (Jules Berry), with a gun. He starts recalling how his story began and so the viewer is sent into a long flashback from the moment he met a young flower shop assistant, Françoise (Jacqueline Laurent), and how everything changed the minute a ruthless dog trainer, Valentin, appeared. The police have now laid siege to the building where he lives and where he is going to commit suicide. As the film unfolds, we learn how much François is a victim of his fate and we come to understand his motive for the murder, a true crime of passion.



Figure 23. *Le Jour se Lève*

The film was also very popular abroad, mainly in the United States, where Anatole Litvak directed a remake of it under the title *The Long Night* (1947), starring Henry Fonda (Joe Adams in the movie) in the Jean Gabin role, Elisha Cook Jr. as Joe's blind neighbour, and Barbara Bel Geddes making her debut as teenage orphan Jo Ann, Joe's girlfriend. The American ending is predictably a happy one though few would consider Henry Fonda's performance as convincing as Gabin's lost soul floundering in self-pity. The film uses, however, the same technique of flashback and presents the same narrative complexity to expose the total despair of a post-traumatic stress war veteran whose circumstances and problems in life can only add to his frustration whatever he tries to do.

Both of these films are impressive portraits of an angst-ridden culture, with the imminence of the next World War. Jean Gabin, in turn, is not only capable of playing ordinary working-class men but he does it with a great conviction (in the case of *Le Jour se Lève* he certainly gains the audience's sympathy). As Andrew Dickos notes, "The psychic malaise written on the physiognomy of the great screen star Jean Gabin – romantic fatalism at its signature best – expressed not fear and terror so much as existential resignation to the perceived inexplicability of man's longings, not terribly mutable through time and destiny" (Dickos 2002:43).

There is a third film made between these two which also summons up Marcel Carné's pessimistic view of the world and which expresses an even stronger romantic fatalism in the characters' lives. *Hôtel du Nord* (1938) is its name and also the place where two Parisian lovers Renée (Annabella) and Pierre (Jean-Pierre Aumont) meet to put an end to their negative and visionless future lives (fig. 24). The suicide pact fails and Pierre, having merely wounded Renée, finds his courage fail too and he flees, giving himself up to the police. A network of subplots leads the film into the heart of Parisian lowlife, with the story of a pimp and the hotel owner, Monsieur Edmond (Louis Jouvet) and a good-hearted prostitute, Raymonde (Arletty). Their dialogue of hopelessness is similar to the lovers' one upstairs in their bedroom. Raymonde turns to Edmond and shouts: "Ma vie n'est pas une existence, si tu crois que mon existence est une vie"³² mirroring her unconscious urge to move away from her tenebrous life. The sets in French Poetic Realist cinema were intended to have solidity, and to render a specific milieu and the ones in this film do exactly that. The cramped rooms of the hotel alongside the Canal Saint-Martin give a

³² "My life is not an existence, if you think that my existence is a life" (*my translation*).

strikingly atmospheric view of the demimonde of these outcasts, and so does another line pronounced by Arletty and which would become one of the most famous lines in French cinema: “Atmosphère? Atmosphère? Est-ce que j’ai une gueule d’atmosphère?”³³



Figure 24. *Hôtel du Nord*

In all these films, especially *Hôtel du Nord*, Carné manages to spread a climate of fear, through dialogues of despondency in a society which was only beginning to stand up against the rise tide of extremism and fascism. Dudley Andrew comments that the film sought to show just how social outcasts live in this spectacular milieu along the Seine:

Hôtel du Nord replaces a cinema of events with one of people, language and milieu. It asks its viewers to enjoy the ordinary interplay of social types on the ordinary streets of Paris. Of course neither those streets (the picturesque Canal Saint Martin and le quai des Jemappes that runs beside it) nor those types (Jouvet as the pimp, Arletty as the whore, Bernard Blier as the cuckold, and so forth) are ordinary at all. An idealized, poeticized reality encourages viewers to measure the reach and aspiration of their own ordinary lives, to look for the picturesque details in their own homes and neighbourhoods, waiting for the chance to blurt out to a friend, a lover,

³³ “Atmosphere? Atmosphere? Do I look like an atmosphere?” (my translation)

or an enemy their own versions of the colourful repartees and tender sentiments Henri Jeanson had written so “naturally” for the cast. (Andrew 1995:5)

Marcel Carné’s films present a very personal version of film realism, even though he never appreciated the term “Poetic Realism”. To him, his films constitute an interpretation of the reality of his time, that is, he was well aware of a certain melodramatic foundation to the realism in his films, he adapted his stories to show how much any ordinary citizen of that period could feel trapped in depressingly squalid situations and end up being subjugated by the social forces that condition their final expectation for happiness. All the elements mentioned above are epochal of films made in France, and they stand as hallmarks of a style. I believe that what made them so popular was the blend they made with the music of the time (the well-known *chanson réaliste* made famous by Edith Piaf or Damia), the dark narratives set in criminal contexts, and the authentic settings involving working-class lives. These elements made these films realistic, not using the conventional happy endings or rustic scenarios but rather evoking a world-weary attitude and a balance between a sort of lyricism and the realism of the settings. In this regard, André Bazin comments that *Le Jour se Lève* owes much to Carné’s ability to be faithful to its décor:

Le décor de [Alexandre] Trauner contribue pour sa part, non seulement à la compréhension du drame, mais plus encore à sa constitution. Comme *Le Jour se lève* serait impensable sans la musique, le drame se viderait de toute crédibilité sans le décor qui l'authentifie. (...) Le réalisme de Carné sait, tout en restant minutieusement fidèle à la vraisemblance de son décor, le transposer poétiquement, non pas en le modifiant par une transposition formelle et picturale comme le fit l'expressionnisme allemand, mais en dégageant sa poésie immanente, en le contraignant à révéler de secrets accords avec le drame. C'est en ce sens qu'on peut parler du « réalisme poétique » de Marcel Carné, très différent du « néo-réalisme » de l'après-guerre. En dépouillant presque totalement l'expressionnisme de ses recours à des transpositions visibles du décor, Carné a su en interioriser intégralement l'enseignement poétique. (...) La perfection du *Le Jour se lève*, c'est que la symbolique n'y précède jamais le réalisme, mais qu'elle l'accomplit comme par surcroît.³⁴

³⁴ Excerpt by André Bazin taken from *Ciné-Club* magazine, dated December 1949, and made available at www.marcel-carne.com:

[Alexandre] Trauner’s décor itself contributes not only to the understanding of the drama, but even more to its constitution. *Le Jour se Lève* would be unthinkable without the music, the drama would be emptied of any credibility without the décor which authenticates it. (...) The realism of Carné, while thoroughly remaining faithful to its décor likelihood, knows how to transpose it poetically, not by modifying it through a formal and pictorial transposition as the German Expressionism did, but by releasing its poetry, by forcing it to reveal secret agreements with the drama. It is in this sense that one can speak about the “poetic realism” of Marcel Carné, very different from the “neo-realism” of the post-war period. By stripping almost completely

Jean Paulhan, editor of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* along with André Gide and Gaston Gallimard, is generally said to be the person who coined the phrase “Poetic Realism” in the thirties to describe the novels of Marcel Aymé, author of *La Rue sans Nom*. Directed by Pierre Chenal, this film was produced in 1933 and presents the decadent world of people who live in a very narrow and filthy street with two lines of putrifying buildings about to be brought down - what one could call “the street of misery”. This slum melodrama depicts grey Parisian lassitude, with a set of characters that seem to move about in a sort of lethargic state, reflecting their lives’ lack of prospects (fig. 25). This type of mood would be extensively reused in the work of other filmmakers such as Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir and Julien Duvivier. In fact, this cinematic style with tightly controlled camera movements and long takes conferred a specific naturalism and atmosphere which explains the dominant look and themes of French cinema of that time. The characters in these



Figure 25. *La Rue sans Nom*

directors’ movies are shown to be multi-layered, always seen from a psychological angle that emphasises their dark and pessimistic attitude towards life. Even when searching

the Expressionism of its resource to visible transpositions of the décor, Carné managed to completely interiorise poetic teaching of it.(...) The perfection of *Le Jour se Lève* is that the symbolic never precedes realism, but that it achieves it as by addition. (*my translation*)

within themselves psychologically, the protagonists in French Poetic Realism seem to get stuck, unable to progress and remain hopeless until death.

This dark mood followed the lines of German Expressionism and German cinema in general, as Poetic Realism's style is indeed much indebted to Weimar cinema. Moreover, German cameramen and set designers were often employed, as were many German directors, including Fritz Lang and Robert Siodmak, who worked in French cinema before moving to America. However, this close interconnection between the two countries and their artistic production does not mean that Poetic Realism did not follow a distinctive path from Expressionism, exhibiting a softer and less extreme use of chiaroscuro. In turn, as various film critics have agreed, it is rather difficult to establish the type of influence that French Poetic Realism had on American *film noir*. Nonetheless, from what I have suggested, it is fair to acknowledge that French artists portrayed an image of fatalism in their films which would be further taken up and developed in *film noir*. As Ginette Vincendeau observed, French Poetic Realism's stylistic and thematic influence "filled the gap between German Expressionism and classical Hollywood cinema" (in Cameron 1992:55), and I should add that the elements of passivity and self-destructiveness and nightmarish or violent behaviour certainly bear parallels with the elements found later in American *film noir*.

Another good example that makes clear the distinction between the fatalism peculiar to French cinema in the thirties and the determinism of the German screen in the twenties is Jean Renoir's *La Chienne* (1931). Based on Georges La Fouchardière novel, this film will be analysed in detail in Part IV of this thesis as it was remade fourteen years later in Hollywood as *Scarlet Street*, one of Lang's great *noir* films. That said, it is clear that Renoir was more concerned with showing the tragic events of the characters as opposed to the more castigatory and bleak vision of Lang transmitted through his protagonist, Chris Cross (Edward G. Robinson), who disintegrates psychologically at the end of the film. In his own words, Renoir affirmed that in *La Chienne* he "came near to the style that I call poetic realism. There is not a yard of dubbed film in *La Chienne*. When shooting out doors, we sought to damp down background noise with hangings and mattresses. I soon discovered that by suitable adjustment an outdoor scene shot on a grey day could give splendid night effects. This was the method I used later in *La Nuit du Carrefour*" (Renoir 1974:106).

Julien Duvivier's *Pépé Le Moko* made in 1937 also belongs to that group of films which is irredeemably pessimistic in its message. The film stars Jean Gabin, in the role of an infamous gangster, Pépé le Moko ("moko" being a slang word for someone from Marseilles), who holes up from the police in the Casbah in Algiers. He feels quite safe there among the members of his gang and surrounded by beautiful women, managing to escape from the police on several occasions (fig. 26).



Figure 26. *Pépé le Moko*

The sense of criminal doom featured in this movie stands as a model for an entire cultural identity, with *Pépé* establishing a character paradigm that still persists today, and which would create a precedent for the *noir* actor icons, like Humphrey Bogart, or John Garfield, or Robert Mitchum. This romantic tragedy reveals exotic places of the Casbah which defines the "fate of Gabin [which] is precisely to be duped by life", writes André Bazin in 1957 about the differences between *Pépé le Moko*'s Jean Gabin and *noir* hero

Humphrey Bogart. This film, like the ones mentioned above, establishes Gabin as the quintessential French tough guy. Michael Atkinson writes:

Thus, *Pépé le Moko* isn't merely a movie to be savored for its own pleasures, but for the way it resonates with the pop-culture past and future. Before it, gangsters were inviolate and interesting only in their viciousness, and their timely deaths were moral objects lessons. Hardened men jeopardized both in the outside world and in their own guarded psyches were merely law-abiding frontier loners or courageous working stiffs, like western heroes or Clark Gable in *Red Dust* and *China Seas* (both of which contribute to *Pépé's* basic structure). The edges of the rational commonwealth were clear-cut – not muddy, as they are in the *Casbah* – and the role of the self-defined man easy to accept. Certainly, before *Pépé* the true anti-hero – the rational man whose moral code conflicts with society, and whose destiny is marked by an ongoing argument with the world – is difficult to find in movies. (Atkinson 1999:76)

Pépé's moral codes certainly go against those of the society, as Atkinson notes, and it is this central character who provides an equivocal portrayal of the human condition (the "ongoing argument with the world"), just like Jean in *Quai des Brumes*. The existential angst expressed in these films was their most important thematic trope, along with their radical inclination to explore issues of political, racial and class conflict.

The misty lights, the wet cobblestones, the long-treed pavements lining the road out of town, the truth-seeking characters, the idea that nothing in life is more important than passion, all these elements present in the narrative of these films helped to define a national cinema of the 1930s which would later be embraced by Hollywood in *noir* productions. After all, "This stylised realism of the *mise-en-scène* is matched by the poetic symbolism within the narrative" (Hayward 2006:151). From the character's point of view, the almost inevitable failure of all projects for escape or evasion and the acceptance of ineluctable fate are all heavily imbricated in the narrative.

In the poetic realist films described above, the film's diegesis is so constructed as to put the degeneration in the male protagonist on display. There is no place for heroism, no place for significant action. In fact, what travels into *film noir* from French Poetic Realism is a personal philosophy of despair, a sense of helplessness. This is even further emphasised by the setting and lighting, gestures and movement in such a way as to mark this degeneration. In the case of *Pépé le Moko*, for example, this is most perceptible in the photography which is categorically *film noir*, with its use of shadows and silhouette to create a sense of clandestine underworld menace. This is most probably the reason why

the combination of lighting effects was crucial to considerations of *mise-en-scène* with these films because they draw attention to themselves. These different approaches to expressive lighting, depicting both character and situation, are European cinema of the twenties and thirties vital inheritance to American *film noir*.

1.6 American Expressionism

Every so often something happens in art, literature, and cinema that leaves a lasting impression and influences much of what comes after. Painting has seen impressionism and cubism; realism and surrealism have pulled the novel in opposite directions. And cinema has evolved through such artistic and cultural developments as expressionism, auteurism, and film noir. (House 1986:61)

This chapter, which I have entitled “American Expressionism”, ends the Section on the cultural influences on *film noir*. Here I wish to reference the straightforward impression that German Expressionism made on a cycle of horror films produced by Universal Studios in the early thirties. I will also review the other major film studio, RKO - the perfect home for B-budget *film noir* - and mention some of the main names that are associated with the evolution of this type of film and how much they may have influenced *noir* stylistics. I hope that by the end of this chapter the characteristics identified throughout Section 1 will make it possible to understand the complex synthesis of both European and American cultural traditions that went into the making of *film noir*.

One of the highest-grossing films of the 1930s emerging from Universal was *The Black Cat* (1934), expressionistically directed by Edgar G. Ulmer. The Studio's German-born boss Carl Laemmle was used to hiring Weimar talents, including Ulmer. The film was initially supposed to be based upon the novel by Edgar Allan Poe³⁵ (judging from the credit list at the end of the film: “a story suggested by the immortal Edgar Allan Poe classic”), who had many of his works transformed into film productions. However, this disturbing horror film was then worked on by Ulmer in collaboration with George Sims, and became one of the finest horror films of that time. The architectural settings with

³⁵ Indeed, the plot initially combined Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Black Cat* but the ending of the original screenplay by Peter Ruric was then transformed by Edgar G. Ulmer with some suggestions from the English Satanist Aleister Crowley, whose devil-worshipping stories were at that time causing furore in the newspapers.

peculiar expressionistic lighting and eccentric geometric forms all intensify the sordid subject matter of the film (fig. 27).



Figure 27. *The Black Cat*

The film opens with the *Orient Express* arriving in Budapest with Joan (Jacqueline Wells), a beautiful young lady, and Peter Allison (David Manners), a young mystery writer, recently married and honeymooning in Hungary, sharing the same train compartment with enigmatic Dr. Vitus Werdegast (Bela Lugosi), who is on a journey from a Russian prison camp to the remains of a town he shielded and fought for before becoming a prisoner of war for fifteen years. They all disembark at the same station at Vizhegrad in the rain and board an unsteady bus which, on the way, crashes and skids off into a ravine, leaving Joan unconscious. The travellers find shelter in a fortress-like mansion, overlooking the site of Fort Marmorus, a bloody battlefield described as “the greatest graveyard in the world”.³⁶ They manage to reach the famous architect Hjalmar

³⁶ The script actually runs like this: “All of this country was one of the greatest battlefields of the war. Ten of thousands of men died here. The ravine down there was piled twelve deep with dead and wounded man. The

Poelzig's (Boris Karloff) mansion where all kinds of twisted relationships and aberrant behaviours are to be found, from Satanism to black mass orgies, sadistic revenge rituals to murder and incest. Visually the film follows the paths of German Expressionism, with lighting effects that create a dark and mysterious atmosphere throughout the film. Some interesting symbols appear in this film, like for example, a spiral iron staircase used several times, especially during the grand tour that Poelzig takes with his guests. The spiral staircase suggests the long descent that the characters of the film will follow into the underground secretive vaults of the Fort, now converted into a tomb mausoleum, and eventually envisages the downturn into chaos their lives are about to undertake. These visual icons would later be very much used by *noir auteurs* as part of a semiotic system peculiar to the *noir* canon, as I explain in the analysis of the films and their symbols in Part IV.

Tod Browing's *Dracula* and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (both released in 1931, February and November, respectively), are credited for having opened the horror cycle. These films would star two major names mentioned in the film above: the former casts Bela Lugosi (in the role of Count Dracula) and Boris Karloff, in the latter, is the Monster. Many other similar productions would follow over the next few years, including versions of "Frankensteins", such as for instance, *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) - perhaps the most celebrated of these films -, *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), and so forth. These productions were actually shot using much the same cinematographic equipment and the same props used in the original film (same castle, for example) with a close attention to composition in terms of décor and design, camera angles and lighting (revealing the significant influence that the films of F.W. Murnau had on Whale's use of the stealthy moving camera).

Another horror cycle started with *Son of Frankenstein* (1939) which was Universal's third Frankenstein film. If the other Frankenstein films appear to be sequels, consistently using the monster figure which falls under the evil spells of someone and creates chaos (fig. 28), Rowland Lee's production makes use of an extravagant style with its looming Gothic sets and lit to generate stark contrasts, strongly influenced by German Expressionism.

little river below was swollen red, a raging torrent of blood. And that high hill yonder, where Engineer Poelzig now lives, was the site of Fort Marmorus, the greatest graveyard in the world."



Figure 28. *Son of Frankenstein*

This is what makes this film less appealing from a dramatic standpoint, but particularly interesting from an architectural set-dressing perspective: filling the film with huge contrasts in light and using reference symbols (for example, the huge slatted shadows on the walls are marks left by the twisted staircase as a particularisation of the perverted minds of the sinister characters in the film; or an enormous fireplace mounted with boars' heads that stretch out into the room just above the people seated at the table which evokes the villagers storming the castle, holding their torches of fire in their hands).

Dracula, in turn, is also visually representative of the Gothic “extravaganza” with its stagy décors and symbolic *mise-en-scène*. When we enter the world of Dracula, the camera seems to assume the point of view of the Lord of Vampires, and thus these shifting perspectives appropriate Dracula's view as an occult seer. The opening scenes with a horse carriage being drawn through the Carpathian mountains in Transylvania sets the whole atmosphere of the film, and as soon as the “visitors” enter the castle, the camera lowers its

pace and takes us to the airless sitting rooms and boudoirs of Dr. Seward's asylum. One of the first successful talkies in America, it should also be remembered that the cinematographer for this film was Karl Freund, who had come from Germany, where he had worked on films like Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), Wegener's *The Golem* (1920), and Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924). Freund was known for his photographic mastery and imaginative camera movement, with his use of tracking shots, which are evident in *Dracula*. All these ingredients combined make *Dracula* an acclaimed classic, especially for its visuals and for the verbal eccentricities of Bela Lugosi.

Karl Freund also photographed two other films which, I believe, not only show the transposition of pure Weimar to Hollywood, but also reveal early experimentation with *film noir* techniques vis-à-vis acting and lighting techniques. French director Robert Florey's *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932) again stars Bela Lugosi (in the role of Dr. Mirakle) and again is taken from an Edgar Allan Poe short story (1841). The film reveals a considerable influence of the German Expressionism, with strong echoes of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in the warped streets of nineteenth-century Paris, mysteriously distorted houses that lean over the glossy paving stones, and ominous darkness. In fact, the final scenes of the movie seem to have been taken from *Dr. Caligari*, when the police arrive just after Eric, the Gorilla (Charles Gemora) kills Dr. Mirakle and seizes Camille (Sidney Fox), running off with her across the rooftops of Paris.³⁷ All in all, the screenwriters, Tom Reed and Dale Van Every, managed to change Poe's original dry detective story into a tale of a maniacal scientist with his talking orangutan (fig. 29), and his attempts to prove that man has indeed an ape-human blood affinity.³⁸ As a Gothic specialist who was originally slated to direct *Frankenstein* (though he ended up directing *Murders in the Rue Morgue*), Florey's finest work was in these low-budget programmers, B-films such as the skilful *noir* production *The Crooked Way* (1949). As for German cinematographer Karl Freund, his more than one hundred films show that he was an Expressionist technician, and when he emigrated to the United States in 1929, he went on shooting well-remembered films such as the above-mentioned *Dracula* and a *noir* film, *Key Largo* (1948).

³⁷ This final act surely also reminds the viewer of the final scene of Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *King Kong* (1933). As a fact of the matter, *Murders in the Rue Morgue* also achieved this scene with stop-motion animation.

³⁸ *Murders in the Rue Morgue* is set just shortly after the publication of Darwin's *The Origins of Species*.

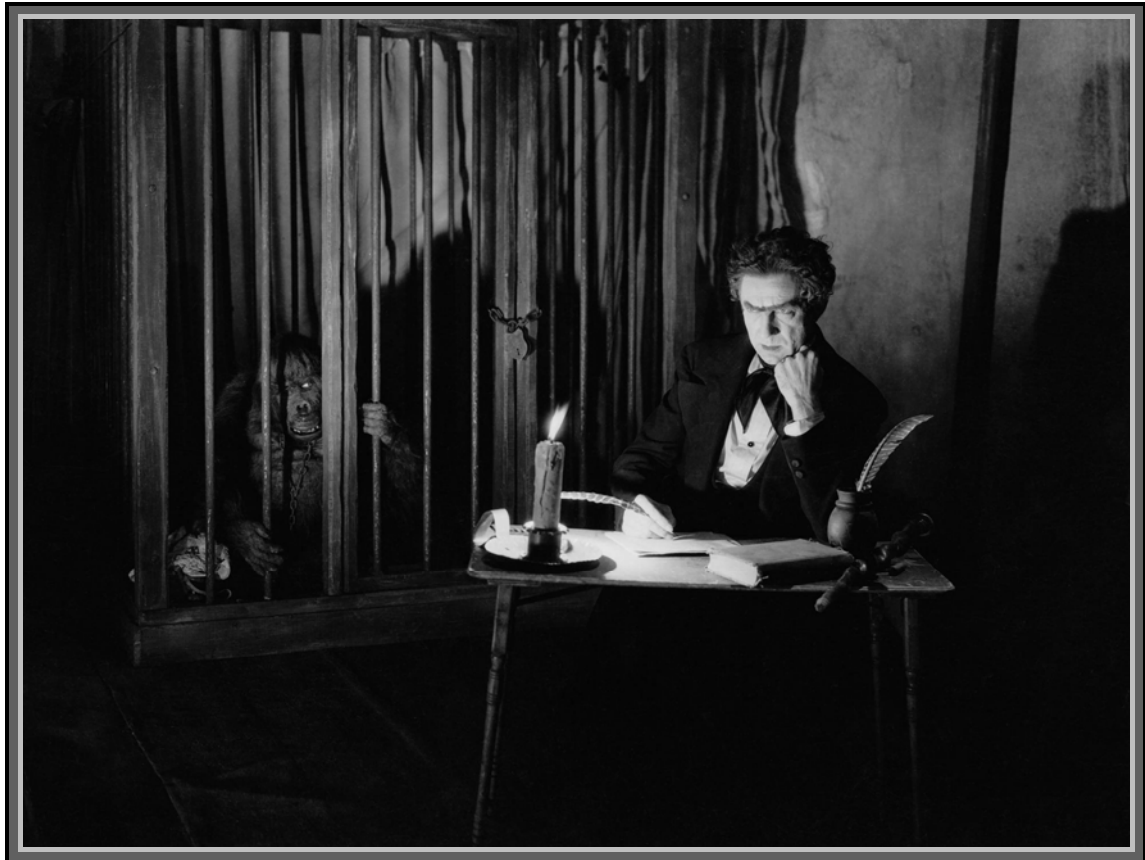


Figure 29. *Murders in the Rue Morgue*

Another film from Universal, both photographed and directed by Karl Freund, is *The Mummy* also released in 1932, which recounts a tale of an English archaeologist, Sir Joseph Whemple (Arthur Byron) who leads his team on a field expedition to Egypt and discovers the Pharaoh's tomb containing the 3700 year-old body of a Mummy, Im-ho-tep (Boris Karloff), an ancient Egyptian prince who was condemned and buried alive (fig. 30). The pacing of the first scenes of the film, along with its acting and lighting, show the stylistic tropes of Weimar cinema of the twenties and early thirties. The rest of the film (in fact, the mummy of the title only inhabits the first few minutes of the film) gains a new dynamism brought about through camera movements and angle and a suggestive *mise-en-scène*.



Figure 30. *The Mummy*

In 1942, Russian-born Val Lewton was named head of the B-horror feature unit at RKO and the initial idea of the studio was to compete with Universal's horror productions. This kind of feature obviously meant some very tight budgets (normally under \$150,000 per film), and would normally last less than seventy-five minutes, but they would provide Lewton with the sort of freedom and creativity that he needed to come up with several great cinematographic successes. His first production was *Cat People* (1942), directed by Jacques Tourneur, a supernatural story about a young Serbian woman, Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon), who meets an American, Oliver Reed (Kent Smith), by the panther cage at the Central Park Zoo. The film obviously uses Expressionist techniques to approach the treacherous subject of dangerous female sexuality, and it is fair to say that, along with *The Curse of Cat People* (a sequel also produced by Lewton and released in 1944), it made a significant development in the horror movie genre. Not just for using inventive formal devices but also for exploring the intricate subject of the human psyche.

The following year, Val Lewton also produced another film directed by Tourneur, *I Walked with a Zombie*. Loosely based upon Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* with the setting reversed from England to Haiti, the film tells the story of Canadian nurse Betsy Connell (Frances Dee) who travels to the West Indies to look after sugar plantation owner Paul Holland (Tom Conway)'s wife, Jessica Holland (Christine Gordon), who suffers from head trauma. As she takes care of the lady, Betsy comes to believe that her situation is due to voodoo curses and rites. The film also touches upon the supernatural, which often makes it difficult at times to understand some of the elements / events of the plot, or why they occur in that particular time and place. I believe, however, that the film's subject matter of

alienation mixed with nuanced performances and its evocative, restless atmosphere, along with its visual sense, make this film come very close to the patterns of *film noir*.

A clear indication of the affinity between horror and *film noir* is a third Lewton film, adapted from the hard-boiled writer Cornell Woolrich's novel *Black Alibi*. Billed as a horror movie³⁹ also directed by Jacques Tourneur, *The Leopard Man* (1943) is set in a New Mexico town, where press agent Jerry Manning (Denis O'Keefe) and his girlfriend nightclub performer Kiki Walker (Jean Brooks) try to attract some publicity to their club by hiring a stunt black leopard (fig. 31).⁴⁰ Jealous and feeling that she is being upstaged,



Figure 31. ***The Leopard Man***

Clo-Clo (Margo), her rival, frightens the animal and it escapes into the dark night desert. The film then revolves round a series of murders (four women) after the leopard's disappearance, with Manning and his girlfriend (who are now accused of and held responsible for these atrocities in town) trying to seek out the giant cat. After all these killings, Jerry becomes suspicious that this slaughter is not actually carried out by the leopard, and thereafter starts playing the role of the detective. In the end, the local museum curator is unmasked as the killer. The Tourneur / Lewton films use animalistic terror to unlock the unconscious of their protagonists and question the nature of perception and the processes of reasoning. J.P. Telotte also states that their films highlighted "the dreamlike qualities of experience, the powers of myth and psychic fantasies and the constant threat of

³⁹ *The Leopard Man* is in fact as much a suspenseful little murder mystery as a horror film.

⁴⁰ The same black leopard (named "Dynamite") which was used in *Cat People* (1942) and brought back for this film.

meaninglessness” (in Spicer 2002:18). In short, their subject manner and style might be regarded as a parallel strategy to the approach of *film noir*.

All of the above productions were a critical and financial success. They created a large pool of icons and motifs (to be further discussed later on in the analysis of individual *noir* films, where I will also illustrate some specific examples of horror / *film noir* cross-over effects) that were carried across into *noir* productions. Most of these films of the thirties and early forties influenced *noir* filmmakers of that period, and their *noir* movies absorbed these visual influences. However, *film noir* does not rely on anything as blatant as the monstrous or supernatural elements of horror with its easily recognised iconic figures and shock effects. And consequently, this supports my view that *film noir* cannot be considered a genre in its own right.

2 Social and Political Influences on *Film Noir*

2.1 McCarthyism



41

I have discussed in the previous parts of this study the popular conception that *film noir* holds up a “dark mirror” to American society. In an age of anxiety left by the two World Wars, social themes came to dominate the late *noirs*. At its peak, classic *film noir* managed to express issues related to the House Committee on American Activities (HUAC), with the fear and paranoia of the Hollywood red scare era, the years of the great anti-communist witch-hunt. The late forties and early fifties were a period of intense anti-communist suspicion in the United States, a time in which thousands of people were investigated and questioned, more often than not in aggressive ways (involving public name-calling, browbeating, vilification of witnesses, threats, etc), for any kind of suspicion of them being communists or communist sympathisers. This plan of action was essentially

⁴¹ This cartoon was taken from the *Washington Post*, March 29, 1950 in which Herbert Block (aka Herblock) coined the term “McCarthyism”. It shows four leading Republicans of that time trying to push an elephant (which was traditionally the symbol of their party) to stand on a teetering stack of ten tar buckets, the topmost of which was labelled “McCarthyism”.

adopted as a House initiative by Senator Joseph McCarthy, from whom it has acquired the name McCarthyism, although many other people and agencies were actively involved in the campaign. The people that were especially targeted were those involved in departments of government and the military, as well as those working in the entertainment industry. Any supposed or alleged affiliation to Communism would be subject to harsh investigations and posed an evident threat to one's personal or professional life. There are many accounts from artists or industry-connected people who, given suspicion about their leftist connections or beliefs, saw their careers totally destroyed and some were even sent to prison.

Many factors can account for this regretful episode, from even before Joseph McCarthy became involved in the political phenomenon. Firstly, the political sway that leftist elements gained especially in the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s, and the way that labour unions began to assert themselves. The damaging strikes at the Disney studios in 1938/9 are the best example of this, and help to explain Walt's later fervent anti-Communism. Secondly, the way they actively opposed fascism should also be taken into account. Thirdly, the entrance of the United States into World War II allying with the Soviet Union meant that the issue of anti-Communism was repressed to a great extent, and only after the end of the war, when the Cold War began, did the strong and suppressive movements of Communism assume relevance with their puppet regimes spread out all over Central and Eastern Europe. The effects of threats from Communism in the United States were soon also felt right across the country, in particular at the beginning of the fifties.

Moreover, a full set of international events took place during this period of great instability, fear and a sense of anguish: from the tests of the atomic bomb,⁴² Mao Zedong's Communist army takeover of China to the considerable expansion in espionage activities during the Soviet Cold War. Infiltration was felt to be reaching the highest levels in the political and social arena, with such people as Igor Gouzenko and Elizabeth Bentley, Alger Hiss - who was first accused of espionage - (and Klaus Fuchs in Great Britain who confessed to being involved with the Soviet Union helping them with atomic bomb secrets), constantly in the newspaper headlines.

⁴² Some *noir* productions began to make references to the panic of bombs threats and other nuclear wars, such as *Kiss Me Deadly* to radiation poisoning as in *D.O.A.* (1950), accentuated by factors of cynicism, alienation, chaos, and the corrupt nature of society to convey a dark vision of contemporary America.

Liberal reforms soon became a spurious justification for the rise of McCarthyism. Child labour laws and women's suffrage could then be referred to as "Communist" or "Red Plots", provoking some turmoil in the New Deal policies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His New Deal, in response to the depression, was then perceived as socialism or communism by many conservatives. Its policies in turn were allegedly seen as communist infiltration by communist policy-makers in the Roosevelt administration.

Lincoln Day, February 9, 1950, marked an important moment in the American history when Joseph McCarthy presented a list of known communists working for the State Department. In his speech, he is usually quoted as saying: "I have here in my hand a list of 205 – a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department". This speech gave rise to a flood of press attention and catapulted McCarthy into the political forefront.

There were many different offices in federal, state and local government whose job was to control and inspect businesses and companies in general and check whether there was any communist involvement. They created committees, so-called "loyalty review boards", and these would examine and prosecute what they held to be Communist activities. The HUAC was one (amongst a number of Senate committees) of the most prominent bodies to look into these activities. J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI director, was not only one of the nation's most zealous anti-communists, but also a very overbearing personality, who designed the loyalty-security programme for President Truman. This programme was calculated actively to face the communist threats and locate the many thousands of government and non-government workers involved in this kind of political activity. It is believed that for this specific purpose of investigation the number of FBI agents more than doubled resulting in one of the biggest assignments ever undertaken by the American government and the Federal Bureau. The whole process, however, of cross-examining people without them knowing the identity of the people who were accusing them (or the nature of the accusations) meant that some of these investigations were engaged in illegally and the final result is that many people lost their livelihoods without having any right of appeal.

The reason why the HUAC is particularly relevant in the context of this work is that it was not only the most well-known and active government committee (created in 1938

and chaired by Martin Dies) involved in anti-communist investigations, but because it achieved its reputation for its efforts to inspect and regulate the Hollywood film industry. A couple of years after the end of WWII, the Committee started a powerful investigation of people working in the film industry, from screenwriters, directors to actors and actresses who might possibly be involved, or were cited as being suspect of communist activities or supporting beliefs in them. These movie professionals were brought to court to testify about their known or suspected membership of the Communist Party and/or association with its members. It was during these testimonies that what became known as the “\$64,000 question” was asked: “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United States?” Among the people sent to Court by the Committee were ten who firmly decided not to disclose the names of people involved. These people, who became known as “Hollywood Ten”, ended up being sentenced to prison, although they were evoking their legitimate First Amendment right to freedom of speech. Apart from being blacklisted from the world of entertainment, these people from the film industry had their integrity questioned in the service of a hysterical cause, better defended by a stricter adherence to American democratic and constitutional values. Interestingly, the dark and brooding tone of *film noir*, with its pervasive atmosphere of fear and paranoia, its sense of hopeless fatalism, echoed the dark, political accusatory climate that was the norm in Hollywood during the House’s hunt for communist insurgents and potential informers. All these factors are well documented, especially the unbalanced accusations made to the victims of McCarthyism, and the frantic subversion of their civil rights.

I have already listed the various (cultural, historical and literary) influences that antedated *film noir*. However, the socio-political interventions that the film industry experienced in the post-World War II period are just as relevant. The *noir* discourse assumed by a minority of filmmakers began to send out signs of radical and critical distress, as a cultural expression of resistance to the political and artistic repression of in those years. Up to this point, it has been made clear that under the oppressive cloud of McCarthyism many entertainment careers were curtailed, and consequently many aspects of motion picture production were affected. However, these political influences cannot be dissociated from the social and historical factors that have also shaped the style, more explicitly, the threat of nuclear war which fuelled the paranoia that pervades the *noir* cycle. Many directors and producers associated with *film noir* – such as John Garfield, Abraham

Polonsky, Jules Dassin, and Edward Dmytryk – depicted in their films the general fear of the potential dangers of the Bomb and the anti-communist spirit. In addition, their works assessed critically the social and emotional costs of American society's aggressive capitalism. *Body and Soul* (1947), written by Polonsky for Robert Rossen and starring John Garfield, has a heavy message about the greed encouraged by the capitalist system (the film is about the paradigmatic story of a slum-bred young man who becomes a successful boxer, but who is corrupted by material success). Garfield also starred in Polonsky's left-wing *Force of Evil* (1948), a melodramatic thriller about a gambling syndicate Wall Street lawyer, Joe Morse (Garfield), who works for a powerful gangster and whose job is to turn the "number rackets" into a legal lottery (fig. 32). John Garfield ended up being blacklisted and Polonsky's career was blighted when he was blacklisted after this film.



Figure 32. *Force of Evil*

Some other examples might be given, such as *Night and the City* by Jules Dassin (his last American film before being blacklisted as a communist) which maintains the formal conventions of *film noir* to present Harry Fabian (Richard Widmark) as an asthmatic and distressed dreamer who snakes through the wrestling foggy streets of post-war London. Through its *mise-en-scène* the film reveals him moving diagonally past dark

buildings and stumbling down alleyways, and reduces him to a black outline, constricted and redirected by an impersonal cityscape. Another film that continues a liberal-left critique of capitalism and which typifies the frenzied, post-atomic-bomb Los Angeles of the fifties is the already-mentioned Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, as a wider allegory of a society that is about to be destroyed. Aldrich's *World for Ransom* (1954) is another war portrait made about a nuclear physicist Sean O'Connor, who is kidnapped so that his knowledge may be sold to the highest bidder among various competing nations (he is one of the only men in the world who knows how to detonate the H-Bomb). "The nihilism underlying these two films", as Dickos notes, "generates the ultimate *noir* perspective in all of American cinema: the impulse toward heroic self-definition becomes a presumptuous exercise in a world reeling further away from a recognizable moral center toward destruction" (Dickos 2002:131).

Henry Hathaway's *The Dark Corner* (1946) is the prototypical reflection of postwar malaise in *film noir* incarnated in Galt's (Mark Stevens) total alienation and hopelessness, captured in his cry of existential anguish: "I feel all dead inside. I'm backed up in a dark corner and I don't know who's hitting me" (see fig. 33). Cyril Endfield was also blacklisted for his committed social and political views and his film *Try and Get Me* (1950) delivers a message of social conscience about the way mob violence operates to engineer the inevitable destruction of a man, Howard Tyler (Frank Lovejoy), hopelessly lost in his own society. Needless to say, the parallels between congressional Red hunts and the exploits of a frantic lynch mob were underscored in this film, and so Endfield subsequently had to leave the country and work in British crime cinema.

In conclusion, these films managed to underline the fear that was now the most abiding preoccupation of American society, with the advent of the atomic and then the hydrogen bomb, plus the perceived threat of a communist invasion. Although a good number of mainstream films continued to insist that all was well in postwar America, at the margins, many of the fifties *noirs*, especially in the wake of the HUAC, appeared to want to reflect a more unsettling scenario, creating a climate of dread and paranoia.

I have identified in this body of movies the *noir* sensibility that is sometimes associated the postwar malaise which I will examine in the section entitled "Postwar Readjustment". One could well apply the suggestion of Douglas Kellner that "films take the raw material of social history and of social discourses and process them into products

which are themselves historical events and social forces” (Kellner 1998:355) to understand the cultural significance of *film noir*, but in my view, their indirect strategy of social criticism was to leave a more unfocused message of fundamental disillusionment. The style that is found in some of the above-mentioned movies is often more direct in its didactic approach, offering explicit social-political statements.

In hindsight, the anti-communist witch hunt cut short the creativity of an important number of left-liberal writers and directors, but it should also be remembered that McCarthyism was only a part of a marked swing to the right in American culture in general and which became reflected in *noirs*, principally those in the 1950s. This idea that *film noir*’s major preoccupations are all related to alienated and despairing protagonists trapped in dark cities, exposing rock bottom in American life, has to do with the temporary defeat of the liberal-left. The politically relevant experiences and socially critical themes of such leftist contributors to *film noir* in later years were arguably subsumed in diverse ways in their films, often expressing a displaced sense of anxiety, enclosure, menace, and generalised paranoia. These existentialist themes, along with the Hollywood’s vision of the Freudian paradigm, will be further analysed in the chapters that follow.

2.2 Censorship and Politics

In the first half decade of the Great Depression, Hollywood's movie-makers perpetrated one of the most remarkable challenges to traditional values in the history of mass commercial entertainment. The movies called into question sexual property; social decorum and the institutions of law and order. (Sklar 1975:175)

I think the whole system of Hays censorship, with its effort to establish a list of rules on how to be decent is nonsensical. A studio can obey every one and be salacious – violate them and be decent. (James M. Cain, Daily News, 1944)

On inspecting the censorial mechanisms governing Hollywood's wartime activities, it is essential to consider wartime production restrictions in order to understand the way the industrial environment of World War II advanced *film noir* style. While the informal codes of practice that governed the film industry had been operative ever since the appearance of cinema, always concerned to make sure that audiences would not be shocked or offended in any way, it was in the decade of the thirties that films started to be more carefully scrutinised and submitted to stronger external regulation. In fact, it was back in 1934 that the Production Code was created, and in order to enforce its guiding principles, Joseph Breen was appointed as Head of the Production Code Administration (PCA). Breen was a powerfully anti-Semitic conservative who thought he had to protect traditional morality and so came forward with a set of specific rules against miscegenation, the misrepresentation of law and religious officers in film, among other related issues.

The Hays Code, after Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) first started to monitor scripts on the West Coast on a regular basis in 1929 and adopted the Production Code, founded by Father Daniel Lord and *Motion Picture Herald* publisher Martin Quigley as its moral blueprint for Hollywood films in 1930. When the National Catholic Legion of Decency threatened to proscribe indecent Hollywood films at the beginning of 1934, Hays established the above mentioned

Production Code Administration. This was to bring to an end the model of self-regulation that had existed in the “pre-Code” cinema of the late twenties and early thirties,⁴³ embodied in the Hays’s advice to filmmakers:

Speaking to the directors, I appealed to their ingenuity and artistic pride, hinting that it takes vastly more to be interesting while observing decent limits than being risqué. I told them, for example, that instead of seeing how far they could get an actress to lift her skirt and still stay within the law they might try seeing how low she could leave her skirts and still maintain audience interest. (Will Hays)

The Code was basically a set of film regulations governing Hollywood productions, with three General Principles which attempted to ensure that films would show “correct standards of life”, including the injunction that crime should always go punished, as shown in Principle 2 of the table below. The Code was therefore an effort to make films endorse family values and defend American legal, political and religious institutions and operated, as Maltby has noted, as a “determining force on the construction of narrative and the delineation of character in every studio-produced film after 1931” (Maltby 1993:37).

General Principles	
1	No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2	Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3	Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

In this chapter, I intend to refer to the *noir* productions that were often a paper-thin edge away from the wrath of the censors or comment on those which were subjected to important changes or even banned in some parts of the US because they violated the strictures of the Code. I have also included the complete list of “particular applications” of the Code in Appendix II at the end of this work to make it easier to understand references

⁴³ These films are normally characterised as raw, subversive, and precisely uncensored.

to these specific restrictions and see more clearly how they were observed and applied in certain cases.

Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* may be taken as a fairly representative example to describe the practical effects of censorship. In the first version of the movie, insurance agent Neff (Fred MacMurray) was featured as being sent to a gas chamber which created some uneasiness among the members of the Breen office. It was declared that both the novel and its cinematic treatment were most unsuitable⁴⁴ and so Wilder had to come up with a new ending. According to the director, Neff's death was among "two of the best scenes I've ever shot in my whole life [the other being the original opening to *Sunset Boulevard*]". It did not take too long for Wilder to consider that an execution was perhaps "unnecessary" and so apart from a different ending, Billy Wilder was also obliged to take into account some other points and softened them to pass the sieve of censorship. For example, Neff does not commit suicide and only dies after confessing to a Dictaphone that he was the one who set up the whole scheme. Regarding the love scenes, as I have already mentioned elsewhere, directors had to camouflage them through the art of omission or recur to suggestive camera movements to ascribe certain meanings. In the case of *Double Indemnity*, the adulterous sequences had to be disguised so, for instance, when Phyllis visits Walter's apartment and kisses him for the first time, he instantly lights up a cigarette, and gets ready to discuss the murder plan. The audience gets to infer, however, that they do go to bed with each other while the rain falls on the bedroom windows. These scenes were then developed to ensure that the rule from the Code would be followed: "The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing" (see p. 465). Adultery and illicit sex, although recognized as sometimes necessary to the plot, could not be explicit or justified and were not supposed to be presented as an attractive option. Cain's quote from the introduction seems to make much sense here: "A studio can obey every one and be salacious" since by means of symbolism and ellipsis (we know that time has passed when Walter and Phyllis get together again after that scene back in the living room where he is seated at one end of the sofa smoking a cigarette, and she is retouching her makeup), Hollywood's enforced morals could be preserved.

⁴⁴ The PCA established that the "whole sequence in the death chamber to be very questionable in its present form (...) specifically the details of the execution (...) are unduly gruesome to the Code."

In this particular case, one can see that studios were mindful of these issues. Billy Wilder's adaptation was sent to several studios, but it was only Paramount which showed the interest and the courage to produce it. The studio was aware that Cain's novel violated the Production Code in many aspects, and effectively Breen's response to the script emphasised that it showed too many "details of the vicious cold-blooded murder" and that, globally speaking, "the low tone and sordid flavour" was "thoroughly unacceptable" (Scheuer 1944:3).

As Cain explained his story, "it is about a married woman who falls in love with another man, kills her husband, fraudulently attempts to collect insurance, attempts to kill her lover and gets killed by him for selfish motives." Yet, it "presents these people with compassion and understanding." Just a couple of days later, on September 24, 1943, Breen agreed that "the basic story seems to meet the requirements of the Production Code." However, another couple of changes would have to be taken into account, namely the ones involving "Phyllis's erotic entrance and the murder of her husband" while taking him to the train station:

page 6	The towel must properly cover Phyllis (...) below the knees with no unacceptable exposure.
page 8	The flimsy house pajamas must be adequate.
page 43	Omit "And listen, don't handle the policy without putting your gloves on."
page 47	Omit "to park <i>your south end</i> ."
page 62	Omit details on disposing of the corpse and explicit details of the crime (...) delete the whole scene/sequence (...) therefore, fade out after they take the body from the car – let the dialogue explain what they did.
page 74	Delete specific poisons in Keyes's speech sequences.

(Biesen 2005:101)

Scenes as the ones described above evoke the "peculiarity of censorship", as Christian Metz notes, adding that "things are always managing to get past it", and that they operate "like the sluices you sometimes see at the mouths of rivers, where the water gets through one way or another" (Metz 1982:254). That is basically what happened with *Double Indemnity* after Wilder complied with and undertook minor changes to the film, as a way of manoeuvring around the Code to make sure that the film would get approved. The

“particular application” concerning “displays of the body” was, for instance, not honoured by the director if we think about the scene in which Phyllis appears with her towel above the knees.

About the role of women – and more specifically about *femmes fatales* in classic *film noir* – it is interesting to note that none could be seen in the braless or otherwise revealing costumes that the molls and nightclub girls in gangster films showed back in the early thirties. To Breen, a 1931 version of *The Maltese Falcon* could never be approved as Bebe Daniels, in her role of Ruth Wonderly or “the dame in the kimono”, appears nude in a bathtub or almost naked in another scene whilst being strip-searched. The next version of the film portrays a Mary Astor completely attired in rather demure ladylike clothes, actually quite inapposite for the role. Having read the MPPDA files with their direct references to objections to certain *noir* films, it is clear that what was of major concern to the censors was the effect on society itself and how to present the public with models of how they should behave (rather than what they actually did), upholding thus an “instrumentalist view of culture” as well:

The important thing is to leave the audience with the definite conclusion that immorality is not justifiable, that society is not wrong in demanding certain standards of its women, and that the guilty woman, through realization of her error, does not tempt other women in the audience to follow her course. (Jason Joy, a MPPDA official censor) (in Jacobs 1991:3).

As I have already pointed out above, most of these *noir* productions would recur to various techniques to get past the censors’ scissors. Since the Code restricted specific depiction of sex and violence, producers and directors felt the need to compensate for that kind of sexual insinuation through dialogues⁴⁵ with squalidly suggestive and *noir* artefacts (like fissuring Venetian blinds, marked shadow, and chiaroscuro low-key *mise-en-scène*, etc). Moreover, some fetish-like symbols would be allowed to intrude into (rather than showing) some of these “forbidden” scenes. The anklet worn by Phyllis provides a strong physical ignition when Neff sees her coming down the stairs and provides them both with ample opportunity to stare at her exposed legs. This point is clinched towards the end of the scene when Neff agrees to return and see her:

⁴⁵ Refer to the previous section on hard-boiled writers who used a clever fusion of hard-boiled style and black comedic wit to capitalise the characters’ dialogue.

Neff: Will you be here too?
Phyllis: I usually am.
Neff: Same chair, same perfume, same anklet?
Phyllis: I wonder if I know what you mean.
Neff: I wonder if you wonder.

Other fetishistic objects abound in *noir*. The indelible image of Rita Hayworth, sexily tossing her hair, wearing her tight gown, and suggestively unrolling her white long glove in *Gilda* (1946) leaves a pronounced air of sexuality loaded with as much sexual symbolism as the double-entendres of the film dialogues.⁴⁶ The white turban over Cora (Lana Turner)'s head similarly emphasises her sensuality and makes a strong impact on drifter mechanic Frank Chambers (John Garfield) and audiences alike. In fact, there is a combination of feminine elements instantly deployed at the first scenes of the film. A lipstick rolls across the floor of the café towards Frank. We know that he picks it up as, in a precise movement, the camera tracks back to her nude slender legs as if following Frank's eyes from the floor. When he looks at all of her he sees a stunningly sexy woman, all dressed in white (see p. 52). All bent down, he picks it up and asks her "You dropped this?" She stands there, simply with her hand outstretched expecting him to bring it over to her. But he does not; he just holds onto her cosmetic in the palm of his hand as if showing that he is not about to release her immediately. Their relationship will then depict *amour fou*, the kind of love that goes beyond the boundaries of normal relationships.

The techniques of the *mise-en-scène*, namely the chiaroscuro lighting and the shadowy visual design that is so characteristic of *film noir*, are, I believe, a necessary response to the Code and the war. The type of visual style that marks *noir* films is attached to specific conventions of expression, by means of association, to accentuate a bleakly authentic vision. To support the realism in their stories, directors would use these systematic procedures which at that time were considered very sophisticated, but which were also a means to deal with the wartime limitations in the use of light or ways to camouflage the inferior quality of recycled studio sets. For *Double Indemnity*, Wilder recalls:

⁴⁶ The film is in fact filled with these double-entendres, like the one when casino owner Ballin Mundson (George Macready) enters the bedroom with Johnny Farrell (Glenn Ford) to introduce him to his wife:

Mundson: Gilda, are you decent?
Gilda: Me? Sure, I'm decent.

Once the set was ready for shooting on *Double Indemnity* (...) I would go around and overturn a few ashtrays in order to give the house in which Phyllis lived an appropriately grubby look because she was not much of a housekeeper. I worked with the cameraman to get dust into the air to give the house a sort of musty look. We blew illuminate particles into the air and when they floated down into a shaft of light it looked just like dust. (Horton 2001:103)

This *modus operandi* translates the kind of spirit that depressed sectors of American society were experiencing during this period, and so dark streets would become emblems of alienation, or the way characters would gaze at certain objects explained their obsessions and be metonymic of the environments they lived in. These cinematic and visual circumstances are on the one hand a reflection of a common ethos that constantly evoke the dark side of American society with a clear cultural and social mainstream but also, as a production value, a stylised vision of the country, on the other. This *noir* sensibility pertains therefore to a cycle of films that share a set of visual stylists that was consistently imposed over time. When Schrader states that “style determines the theme in every film”, I would also add that *noir* style stands on its own and should not be regarded as being the result of a unique body of films, as Part III proposes to argue.

Finally, “the wartime environment and its production constraints directly contributed to the psychological paranoia and claustrophobia of Wilder’s *film noir*” (Biesen 2005:109). The supermarket scene from *Double Indemnity* (see fig. 66) stands as a very clear example: Phyllis and Walter meet in one of the aisles since they cannot afford to be observed in a normal rendezvous. This is a very expressive frame, in which we barely see Phyllis’s face wearing dark sunglasses (perhaps working as a major symbol to shield her eyes and her possible hidden motives from Neff) and, almost in another dimension, tall Walter, trying to glance over at her while she looks straight ahead. This scene is extraordinary: we see both characters physically close together and yet their eyes can never meet in a moment when they are conspiring to kill Phyllis’s husband. Literally now, in the background, we see an array of “Quality Foods” products displayed harmoniously (the *mise-en-scène* is very suggestive showing the two characters trapped in between the two aisles foreshadowing their physical and moral entrapment and consequent ending) which, during a wartime of rationing, seem almost too mundane to be looked at. During production of the film, as a matter of fact, Paramount was forced to patrol the studio

against any possible theft of grocery items, thus providing its own local paranoia to the making of the film.

Many other films were produced during the war but were not released until the whole conflict was brought to an end. However, it is possible to ascertain that these wartime crime films were an unambiguous indication of Hollywood's new penchant for *film noir*. They in fact pushed at the limits of what was permissible; soon after the war it is apparent that the floodgates had been opened and the films started to be released when more and more cinemas went back into full operation. In this regard, Sheri Biesen states that:

Cain's tough fiction encouraged an abundance of Code-approved hard-boiled film noir by the end of the war. Because studios had stockpiled roughly 200 films, completed but not released, throughout the duration, these wartime production trends also resulted in the proliferation of crime pictures in 1946, a delayed reaction to Hollywood's booming war industry. (Biesen 2005:123)

Biesen's comment underlies another relevant aspect of the Production Code as an agent of commercialism. Film's profitability has always been (and still is) what the industry existed to promote, even or especially if it entailed being, generally speaking, conservative and too conformist at times. Studio executives themselves were often watchful and traditionalist figures, feeling the need to attract and understand their audiences, but also to comply with the boundaries of permissible representation within the industry and to defer to external regulations at the same time.

All these aspects bring out the issue of control over Hollywood's politics. The type of debate and negotiation that studios, and producers or film industry people would have with the Breen Office shows the type of coalition of liberal and socialist interests that flourished throughout the Depression and World War II. As I have noted above, the history of these debates is exactly inscribed in the movies themselves. Pictures such as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932),⁴⁷ or both Lang's *Fury* (1936) and *You Only Live Once* (1937) are *noir* social melodramas that were made self-consciously for their "social problem" dimensions and their echoes of the New Deal populism, underlying that alienation and angst are both personal and mass ills. These films reflect the social and

⁴⁷ This entire film is actually placed within the consciousness of the disillusioned, ignored, and maltreated veteran, which I explore in the next section "Postwar Readjustment".

political history of their moment, their *Zeitgeist*, and their stylistic influences that had come before, giving rise to a new film form, the *film noir*.

During this period, Hollywood's darkly psychological thrillers were often strongly criticised not just by the Breen Office, but also by well-known leftists and Communist Party intellectuals. John Howard Lawson, the first president of the Screen Writers' Guild, attempted to prove in 1935 that "the function of revolutionary drama is to circumvent a Freudian escape from truths people wish to avoid" (Schwartz 1983:135). So films such as *This Gun for Hire* (1942) or *Gun Crazy* (1950) were criticised by Lawson and other members of Hollywood's radical Left. Naremore argues, due to their "psychoanalytic properties" and also because they used the representative image of the gangsters, turning them into heroes, to combat fascism.⁴⁸

These battles over what was permissible raged throughout the immediate postwar period, but became more infrequent in the fifties. Films such as *The Big Sleep*, *The Killers* and *The Dark Corner*, all 1946 productions, were taken as sinister reflections of American angst and moral decay, and yet they all passed censorship. After the war, films like these were scrutinised by a group of liberal experts and sociologists, which illustrates that the Code became less enforceable as time went by. With regard to the censor's judgements, James Agee puts it bluntly: "the function once performed by clubwomen and the nastier kinds of church pressure groups (...) will be useless unless such opportunities are sought by, and given to, people who are capable of taking mature advantage of them (...) rather than by the kind of people who used most earnestly to oppose priggishness" (Agee 1958:238). Agee's first reference is to the Legion of Decency, a Catholic group created in April 1934, and which threatened to boycott Hollywood at a time when the MPPDA was unable to enforce the Code. Almost immediately (but not for a very long period of time), producers relented and agreed to a strict enforcement of the Code under the administration, as I said, of Joseph Breen, himself a prominent Catholic layman. Whilst this challenging censorship environment throughout World War II was a significant cause contributing to a rich 1940s *film noir* style, the Code became progressively more and more recognised as inappropriate and unfashionable. Despite this, it was not abandoned before 1968, when a new rating system was put in place.

⁴⁸ Phillip Raven (Alan Ladd) in *This Gun for Hire* plays the role of a tough guy who actually breaks with 1930s criminal characteristics by being given a Freudian rationale-parental abuse: he killed his vicious stepmother who struck him with an iron, deforming his wrist.

2.3 Postwar Readjustment

If the mood of the postwar era was split between the celebration of family life and a desperate worry about imminent nuclear destruction, the Hollywood films of the period, it is hardly surprising, manifest a similar mix of optimism and pessimism. (Conrad 2006:112)

One of the reasons we refer to certain films as being classic *noirs* has to do with the fact that, not coincidentally, they fall in the period from the moment America got involved in World War II through to the Eisenhower years. This period of *noir* – which I have already identified as beginning with John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon*, in 1941, and ending with Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* in 1958 – is filled with a good number of productions depicting the readjustment of veterans returning from war to a newly reconstituted society and to a new civilian life. It is undeniable that like any other extended conflict, the Second World War left profound scars, with strong psychological effects upon its combatants. Some were permanently traumatised by their wartime experiences and their unpredictable violence, instability and aimlessness made them unsuited for civilian life. Many *noir* films actually describe the dilemma these maladjusted veterans had to face and their difficulty at achieving reintegration both professionally and with their families. This precise sense of alienation merges with a wider sense, strengthened, as seen in the previous section, by the demented McCarthyism of the fifties, of a society that punishes failure to conform and suspects those who do not or cannot fit into that society. In “Notes on *Film Noir*”, Paul Schrader writes that:

The disillusionment many soldiers, small businesses and housewife / factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film. (...) The war continues, but now the antagonism turns with a new viciousness toward American society itself. (Schrader 1972:12)

The returning veteran was often a disillusioned man, feeling the shock of readjustment, but at the same time a sense of marginalisation or exclusion. Back in 1946, William Wyler launched his self-conscious film *The Best Years of Our Lives* which is a

prototypical reflection on the postwar malaise. The story focuses on three honoured veterans returning home at the end of WWII who must face their personal demons and deal with the challenges of restarting their lives anew. They feel that they have been cheated out of their pre-war jobs and they cannot help but be destabilising elements in the unsatisfactory jobs they get.

With *film noir*'s veterans the sense is much wider, however. The returning veteran is indeed the key *noir* protagonist, normally identified explicitly as such, but often he is metaphorically representing someone who, victim of dislocating forces, has to account for a missing period in his life. These veterans brought along with them a full array of physical, social and psychological problems (lingering issues from their military years), which their civilian lives had to resolve. Their amnesia can easily make them victim heroes as in *Deadline at Dawn* (p. 62) or *Somewhere in the Night*, both from 1946, among many others. The latter is a film directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and in my view is a paradigmatic film, whose protagonist, George Taylor (John Hodiak), is an amnesiac veteran. Ex-marine, Taylor wakes up in a military hospital and discovers he is a victim of amnesia with only two clues as to his past: a bitter letter from a girl who, now dead, hated him and whose name means nothing to him and another equally puzzling letter from a business associate signed "Larry Cravat". The film, a thriller with psychological overtones, sticks closely to the war psychology of a man's odyssey in quest of himself. *The Crooked Way* is another *noir* that follows the same narrative pattern, that of an amnesiac hero. An honoured veteran, Eddie Rice (John Payne) leaves the rehabilitation ward (he is a victim of a war wound that has left him a permanent amnesiac) and tries to recover his past. In both cases, the protagonists come from Los Angeles, they are victims of the war and are just as isolated at the end of their narratives as they were at the beginning.

Edward Dmytryk's *Crossfire* (1947) contained the broadest range of maladjusted veterans, from the thin-skinned and susceptible falsely accused victim, Arthur Mitchell (George Cooper), to the psychotic Montgomery (Robert Ryan) who, completely drunk and belligerent, beats Joseph Samuel (Sam Levene) to death on grounds that he happens to be Jewish. The film deals with the topic of anti-Semitism and digs up many sensitive postwar issues, giving it the edge of a serious social problem film. It has an insidious sense of a tense, dislocated society made up of desperate people with seedy dives, and thus the film slyly turns into a vehicle for the exploration of bigotry.

In this group of films, the bleak and fearful narrative of the postwar protagonist differs slightly from the trends that followed early *noir* productions by the end of the forties. By then, the maladjusted veteran was not a relevant figure anymore and was substituted by the rogue cop (another figure trained to kill), but an equally subverting social force. However, according to Lee Horsley and David Goodis, these *noir* narratives are normally structured around an opposition between “home” and “wandering”, in which the displaced central character moves about in a reckless manner without the family references that are usually present in a social context. These protagonists become then not only victims of the war but are also socially excluded. Their plight is less to do with the frantic search for some way out of an economic stalemate than with an irremediable sense of exclusion. The former may see home as an intangible or an inaccessible place, whereas the latter returns from the war in apparent peacetime to discover the corrupt and feral nature of the American society itself. This is the theme of Robert Montgomery’s *Ride the Pink Horse* (1947), in which an ex-GI known only as Gagin (Robert Montgomery), a man devoid of identity, travels to San Pablo, a rural New Mexican village, to avenge the death of his old war time buddy. Home is completely unreachable for “the man with no place”, as the villagers refer to Gagin.

The concept of “wandering” is different in the case of Stanton Carlisle (Tyrone Power) in *Nightmare Alley*, released in 1947 too, and which shows the rise and fall of a con artist man working for a seedy travelling carnival. The movement of their narratives seems to be similar, that is, getting away from something but for different reasons. One can be the victim of social misunderstanding and discrimination, while the other feels that society is incapable of establishing a social bond with him again, and regards him with distrust. In both cases, though, as Horsley concludes, the protagonists function as scapegoats for exposed dishonesty as they are supposed to compensate for some societal responsibility or any wrongdoing they were (socially) forced to commit. In either context, these protagonists are referred to as the “damaged men” or the “wronged men”, for the different reasons given above, and their existential awareness, loneliness and dread are crucial qualities of *film noir*.

There is a third group of films which portrays a similar thematic - at least at the level of “damaged men” – but which this time shows ex-veterans of war loathing criminals and conducting vendettas against them. *Where the Sidewalk Ends* is a 1950 Otto Preminger

film which tells the story of a fine soldier, Dixon (Dana Andrews), who is today a New York City Police Detective, and who despises all criminals because his father had been one (see p. 248). The film has some very important *noir* motifs, namely Dixon as the archetypal *noir* anti-hero and a brand of violence that is “lurking below urban society” and that also lies beneath Dixon’s skin because of his genetic inheritance, the ruthless and cynical “cop with a dark past.” Aching and disoriented near the end, Dixon summarises his lot in a kind of reassessment of his life: “Innocent people can get into terrible jams, too. One false move and you’re in over your head.” Kirk Douglas in *Detective Story* (a 1951 William Wyler feature) plays exactly the same role, that of a relentless NYC policeman, whose bitterness allows him to show no mercy towards criminals. Robert Ryan’s Jim Wilson in *On Dangerous Ground* (1952) is perhaps the clearest embodiment of this type. Again, a New York City policeman, Wilson, who is on the verge of a nervous breakdown and whose life has made him abrasive and aggressive. The film was acknowledged for the special visual treatment it received from director Nicholas Ray and for its narrative (the journey of a loner from city to country and, metaphorically, his own inner journey).

In conclusion, the narrative patterns and visual style of *film noir* enabled it to explore this problem of maladjustment. As seen, World War II veterans rendered amnesiac or psychotic by wartime traumas soon turned out to be an important preoccupation in the immediate aftermath of the war with the returning veteran becoming key *noir* protagonists of the period (1946-8). These veterans brought with them a series of social and psychological problems, and their amnesia made them become victim heroes, as seen in films such as *Deadline at Dawn*, *Somewhere in the Night* and *High Wall* (1947). The memory of the heroes of these films is often blacked out after having committed a crime (in *High Wall* Steven Kenet (Robert Taylor) blacks out while his hands are around his wife’s neck) or having stumbled into a murder (as is the case with the protagonist George Taylor in *Somewhere in the Night*).

Finally, it is worth recalling that the topical character of the maladjusted veteran in *film noir* by the end of the forties was taken over by the rogue cop, another significant figure who anticipates the concerns of the early fifties cycle of rogue-cop thrillers. I have dedicated a chapter to this special *noir* character (chapter 1.8) who, seen as a destabilising social force, happens to be the individual officer that sets himself above the law as he comes to eclipse the many commendable law enforcement agents in *film noir*. As I will

explain, these *noir* heroes of the fifties can at times become obsessively enthusiastic and brutal in their determination to carry out their professional duties. Most importantly, though, they are the ones who point the finger at failing institutional forces and they also show the insidious corruption and instability that is at the heart of the *noir* world.

2.4 Freudianism and Existentialism

The person best able to undergo psychoanalysis is someone who, no matter how incapacitated at the time, is basically, or potentially, a sturdy individual. This person may have already achieved important satisfactions—with friends, in marriage, in work, or through special interests and hobbies - but is nonetheless significantly impaired by long-standing symptoms: depression or anxiety, sexual incapacities, or physical symptoms without any demonstrable underlying physical cause. One person may be plagued by private rituals or compulsions or repetitive thoughts of which no one else is aware. Another may live a constricted life of isolation and loneliness, incapable of feeling close to anyone. (Paris 2005:107)

Sexuality, be it hidden or prohibited, has always been a key issue in Freudian psychoanalysis. Most *noir* thrillers have recourse to psychoanalytical ideas as a means to suggest what filmmakers could not in fact show due to censorship mechanisms. On the whole, classical Hollywood had many problems with these representational boundaries. With *film noir* the difficulty was further accentuated since this group of films was especially centred on corruptive and sexual machinations, making them a distinct and separate entity within the history of American film. The association between psychoanalysis and sex would thus have to find a form of indirect representation in which allusiveness through condensation and displacement played primary roles. In this context, it is worth quoting Borde and Chaumeton at length:

In *film noir* there is an attempt to create an atmosphere of latent, vague and polymorphous sexuality which everyone could project their desires into and structure how they wanted, like a Rorschach ink-blot (...). By such means of playing with official censorship, this eroticism recalls Freud's notion of the dream-work: instead of showing forbidden realities, seemingly neutral elements are introduced which are nevertheless evocative by association or through symbolism. So dance is an age-old transposition of the sexual act itself, but the 'thriller' has from time-to-time made subtle use of this worn-out allegory (...). Certain fetishistic themes could be explained in a similar way: the boots and gloves of Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (...). The sadomasochistic episodes, in accordance with the very subject of *film noir*, lent themselves particularly well in this technique of allusion. In the pleasure / violence pairing, the exhibiting of the second term will sometimes add up to a substitute for the first, the presence of which will be implied by a few details

(*Gilda*, *White Heat*, *Scarlet Street*, etc.). At times one guesses at sexual situations that are abnormal or on the verge of anomaly: for example in *Gilda*, in which several touches hint at the murky relations between men. (Borde & Chaumeton 2002:145)

Many *noir* films are characterised by this eroticism which is normally alluded to in a symbolic manner or evoked, as Borde and Chaumeton suggest, by association. Later, in an in-depth analysis of films in Part IV, I will focus on the presence of symbols as a part of the *noir* visual style and comment on their effectiveness and suggestiveness. As Janey Place notes, many of these symbols go beyond their customary meaning from a semiotic point of view: a simple cigarette leaving clouds of smoke, for instance, can become a prompt for mysterious and depraved sensuality or the iconography of violence (especially the use of guns) can be a specific symbol of women's "unnatural phallic power" (as in films like *Kiss Me Deadly* or *The Big Heat*).

The number of crime thrillers that contained Freudian motifs was unusually high, especially in *noir* productions from the end of the war. In fact, many of these films depict a wide variety of disturbed mental states and they certainly constitute one of the most striking demonstrations of the implantation and growth of psychoanalysis in American society. However, the various indirect references made to psychoanalytical concepts or to psychiatrists represent much more than is required by the simple depiction of troubled minds. They constitute a means of recognising and presenting the motivations, desires, sexuality, and distressed states of mind of a range of characters that might appear inexplicable under the Code. This emotional and affective *noir* world is repeatedly suggestive of certain abstractions, such as alienation and obsession, showing that *film noir* is openly dependent on external intellectual systems, such as Existentialism and Freudianism, for its dramatic meanings.

Film noir resorts to a very precise *mise-en-scène* to yield suggestions of repressed or hidden sexual desires and murderous impulses. Steve Thompson's (Burt Lancaster) pained avowal to fidelity to his former wife in *Criss Cross* is denotative of the desolate quality of the typical *noir* figure's obsession. In its sexual elements, it may appear explicitly Freudian: Thompson is still emotionally and physically obsessed with and attached to Anna (Yvonne De Carlo), as she symbolises not just sexual release but a fantasy of escape from the present and its oppressive reality. In subsequent flashbacks the viewer gets to know in a detailed manner the true nature of Thompson's relationship with

Anna. She stands there before him, all of sudden, not physically but oneirically, as if coming back again from his early moments of reverie. Thompson is not unique in the way he idealises a particular woman. The same heart-rending fault destroys other men in films as varied as *Scarlet Street* (to be analysed in detail later), *Angel Face* (1953), and *The Locket* (1947). These *noir* productions are some examples of destructive sexuality in male protagonists, suggesting that their female counterparts are some sort of infection, like Nancy (Laraine Day)'s illness in *The Locket*. The sexual content in these movies, melded often with violence, is at times very pronounced.

At the same time, as Dana Polan has noted, the effect of bringing Freudian psychoanalysis into the *noir* action can be interpreted in two patently opposing ways: on the one hand, it was the kind of discourse that made the study of unconscious motivations (the unknown forces of the psyche) appropriate; on the other hand, it was a rational, positive science that claimed to provide the solution or a cure for an array of social and psychic ills (Polan 1986:14-5). Mark Vernet, in his *Freud: Effets Spéciaux Mise en Scène: U.S.A.*, also refers to this "cure" as a cathartic method:

Le cinéma américain parle psychanalyse avec un fort accent. (...) Ce tamisage de la psychanalyse par le cinéma de fiction explique que les films américains n'aient retenu, comme modèle de cure, que celui défini par la méthode cathartique. Le cinéma américain en fait *Le* modèle, alors qu'on sait qu'il ne s'agissait que de la première étape, qui fut très vite dépassée et qui reste très limitée dans le temps. Pourquoi des films tournés à partir de 1940 s'en tiennent-ils à l'état des travaux en 1890 (La conduite de la cure telle que Freud a pu la pratiquer entre 1880 et 1895: la méthode cathartique) ? Mais parce que c'est ce modèle qui correspond le mieux aux schémas du cinéma classique de fiction. (Vernet 1975:229)⁴⁹

As shown above, there is this sentiment for the *noir* protagonists that mysterious or unrevealed forces exist and which determine their destiny. These unknown forces belong to the psychic domain, a comeback of the repressed, as Mark Conard mentions, namely at the level of the libido or the *id* (as Freud envisaged). In most leading examples of *film noir*, the author concludes, it is the unidentified and unknowable *id* that is summoned up. As Freud put it: "We approach the *id* with analogies: we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of

⁴⁹ "The American cinema speaks of psychoanalysis with a strong accent. (...) This sifting of psychoanalysis by fictional cinema explains why American movies never retained any other model of treatment than that defined by the cathartic method. For American cinema it is *The* model. Yet we know that this model was only a first stage - one which was very short-lived and remains very limited in time. Why would films shot after 1940 keep to the state of the art of 1890 (the type of treatment conducted by Freud between 1880 and 1895: the cathartic method)? It is simply because this model is best suited for the patterns of classical fiction cinema" (*my translation*).

seething excitations” and adds that “the ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the *id* and its tendencies, and endeavours to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the *id*” (Freud 1965:73). The radioactive material contained in the box of Robert Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly*, and which Veda (Maxine Cooper) has dubbed “the great whatsit”, describes perfectly this Freudian notion of the ego overlapping the *id* in an attempt to cleanse the “reality principle” (a concept which describes how the ego functions) and re-establish the balance. In fact, “the nether world” of the film becomes a totally destroyed place, reduced to radioactive ashes at the end.

The unconscious territory of the *noir* male protagonists is often put to the test, when they find that there is no turning back in their lives after having encountered a *femme fatale*, almost as though she symbolises the materialisation to consciousness of lethal weaknesses (the ignoring of the “reality principle”) and often to their counterparts’ destruction (if not physical, then at least in terms of the depths of the psyche). In this nether region, “the dark, inaccessible part of our personality,” the *id* “knows no judgement of value: no good and evil, no morality.” Again, the (male) ego, partly composed of the *id*, is responsive to all sorts of (dangerous) stimuli from this *noir* external world (frequently populated by a *femme fatale*), in which it is hard for him to recognise that the primitive unconscious also knows no negotiations and no “idea of time” (Freud 1965:73-6).

There is a key passage in an article by Laurence Miller on Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly* which I believe is worth quoting at length on the issue of Freudian symbols:

In support of his interpretation, [Robert] Lang believed the switchblade knife that Paul Richards attacks Hammer with and the cigarettes that Hammer smokes are important Freudian symbols. The knife is part of a “disguised homosexual fantasy, a sadomasochistic scene in which Hammer is out cruising for a homosexual encounter – expressed here in violent form by the knife (...) that can be extended and retracted.” The cigarette occupies the “privileged status” as “phallic signifier,” which is accounted for by “Hammer’s compulsion to assert his masculine self.” Further, “One cannot give or receive a kiss when one has a cigarette in one’s mouth. This is one of the reasons why Hammer smokes. The implications of a kiss are too deadly for him, and that is why in the film his kisses ‘lie.’” And, “in moments of doubt, when Hammer must concede to Pat’s legal / moral authority, Hammer reaches into Pat’s breast pocket for a cigarette – a phallic substitute for surrender, in a context of affection / identification that cannot be expressed in any other way” (Miller 1989:69).

Whether one agrees with this particular application or not (I consider that this view lacks grounding in Freudian theory, more precisely in terms of explaining and understanding human behaviour) is not altogether the point here; it serves the purpose of demonstrating why seeing symbols in *film noir* from a semiotic point of view is a fruitful approach to unravelling a system of coded meanings. This will be carried out later on with the detailed film analyses that follow. For now, I would like to stress that issues of consciousness and the unconscious, of subjectivity and intentionality, are all linked and integral to culture, and therefore are continually shifting in the relationship between meaning and context. Times and categories change, and so do perspectives, and consequently, one should not consider exclusively *film noir*'s main formal components to provide a plausible definition of what this category of film really is. This would prove to be too inadequate, as *film noir* also involves a sensibility, a specific mode of looking at the world, in short, as Richard Maltby has argued, a reflection of the *Zeitgeist*.

It is also worth restating that *film noir* is indeed identifiable by an evocative eroticism. From *Double Indemnity* and *The Big Sleep* to *Gilda* and *White Heat*, these movies contain sequences where a man and a woman are involved in a teasingly displaced sexual negotiation through oblique and flirtatious dialogues, dances serving as "an age-old transposition of the sexual act itself" (Borde & Chaumeton 2002:53), or "fetishistic themes" like "the boots and gloves of Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*" (*ibid*). There, she plays a heroine who is portrayed as a promiscuous woman in lines such as "Gilda gambles as recklessly as she lives!" Another passage in which she asks her husband Ballin to do up her dress, she jokes: "I can never get a zipper to close. Maybe that stands for something; what do you think?" The film is filled with lines of sexual innuendo. One that is particularly relevant here and that makes a straight allusion to psychoanalysis is as follows:

Johnny: Get this straight. I don't care what you do. But I'm going to see to it it looks alright to him [her husband]. From now on, you go anywhere you please, with anyone you please. But I'm going to take you there and I'm going to bring you home. Get that? Exactly the way I'd pick up his laundry.

Gilda: Shame on you, Johnny. Any psychiatrist would tell your thought-associations are very revealing (...). All to protect Ballin – who do you think you are kidding, Johnny?

The intellectual foundations of *film noir* in respect of paranoia and psychological disturbance are Freudianism and Existentialism. The latter was an outcrop of late

Romanticism present at the very heart of the American hard-boiled novel - as seen before – and made a strong impact during and after the Second World War. Existentialism in *film noir* is to be found and expressed not in terms of the school of thought that developed in occupied France, but rather as a general attitude, which had ideological and philosophical significance, as André Bazin observed in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1957: “even if there wasn’t exactly a genre there was a style, the realist *film noir*.” This way *film noir* describes a world of despair and pessimism, in dark cities with dark foggy corners, in which the *noir* character wanders, sometimes to the sound of a jazz tune like “Slowly I open my eyes”, like Eric Stanton (Dana Andrews) in *Fallen Angel*, in the hope of realistically “opening his eyes” and “waiting for something to happen” as he tells to June Mills (Alice Fay) to which she responds “Nothing’s going to happen.”

In the years before and during the war, when the French were themselves overtaken by powerful political and historical forces, many of the most significant themes of existential philosophy were incorporated in the hard-boiled novels of Dashiell Hammett, Chandler, and James M. Cain, as they were in the more celebrated writing of Hemingway and Faulkner.⁵⁰ This group of writers saw many of their novels being adapted by Hollywood in the forties in a time of pre and postwar radicalism, depicting generations of individuals who seemed to be very much alienated from the inconsistencies of modern urban society. David Riesman’s influential sociological study of modern conformity from 1950, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, recognises and analyses three personality types that coexist in his society and how they evolve in a certain direction according to cultural, social and moral values: the “tradition-directed”, the “inner-directed” and the “other-directed”. He uses them to explain the conformity of the era and to express his feeling of sorrow about the decline of the independent American spirit. He argues that a common personality type of the 1940s was “the other-directed character”, meaning the type of people who needed to be emotionally in tune with the others but who might be otherwise lost if not given a strong sense of social orientation. He also notes that postwar American society impels individuals to “other-directedness”, the finest illustration of which being modern societies, where people try to be socially accepted and to avoid being excluded from their community. This lifestyle, Riesman notes, can also have great power and influence, making people give up any “inner-direction” in their lives

⁵⁰ Albert Camus is actually said to have confessed that he had got much of the inspiration to write *L’Étranger* (*The Stranger*) after reading Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

or assume the goals and ideology of their own community. Paradoxically, he concludes, this particular behaviour produces social groups of individuals that find it impossible to act in terms of companionship. The individual becomes thus progressively more alienated from the shapeless indeterminacy of modern urban life.⁵¹ In this sense, literary *noir* develops its own narratives of disagreement and its exposures of repression, discrediting the prevailing myth of an integrated, contentedly conformist America.

Richard Schickel makes a useful point when he states in an article that he wrote in 2007 that *noir* films managed to place “a new stress on the power of the past”:

Noir films, with their greatly intensified visual style and their stress on perverse psychology, weren't reflecting our misery in a peacetime economy, as Schrader suggests. Instead, their aims were quite different (don't forget, they were meant to entertain). For one, they were trying to give the traditional crime film a new lease on life - particularly in the way it represented the city's place in the postwar world. Somewhat more originally, they were placing a new stress on the power of the past - something most of us thought we had buried - to reach out and twist our fates when we least expected that to happen. (Schickel 2007:43)

In truth, *film noir* of the fifties was not interested in reflecting the time of prosperity that the country was experiencing after the postwar. Despite the fact that numerous changes occurred - both industrially and technologically -, the common individual remained practically defenceless against these major forces, and was socially and sometimes even ideologically pushed to conform to the national mood of need for existential self-definition, as Lee Horsley observes. After the whole set of events that had erupted in France since the thirties - illustrated by the French as “les années noires” – many literary writers started to express their existentialist concerns as a way of understanding the sinister trends in modern literature and film. In the meantime, the philosophy of the French existentialists travelled to America, along with their anxieties, as a reaction towards the absurdity of modern life. In line with this, Horsley concludes, American writers in general gradually started to convey a stronger logic of “self” and “community”, incorporating in their works the image of worried and isolated anti-heroes.

This existentialist sentiment reminds us to a great extent of Ernest Hemingway (often considered America's premier literary loner) as personal alienation was a major element of his fiction. The most significant aspects of our personal lives are to be found in our ability

⁵¹ These general social attitudes of the time were also evident in other films, such as Nunnally Johnson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) or Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* (1957).

to persist and overcome difficulties, he suggests, adding that “existence” comes before “essence”. His characters are then responsible for creating their own essence, with personal choices which will help them see and understand whether the world has any meaning for them or not. In *film noir* it is also at the level of the individual that the fragmented psyche of the protagonist reveals itself. Alienation and paranoia constitute a mysterious force that often transcends the *noir* figure, like the hapless Al Roberts in *Detour* with his final declaration: “Someday fate or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all” (see p. 83). Roberts feels the very same intimations as the principal French advocate of Existentialism, Albert Camus: “at any street corner, the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face”. This existential awareness is indeed one of the defining features of *film noir*, and it just reinforces the existential despair that follows on from the almost compulsively erroneous choices made by *noir* characters. The sense of inescapable entrapment is often therefore reinforced by an existentialist consciousness of life’s absurdity experienced intellectually by the *noir* protagonist. However, the critical distinction between *Detour*’s image of a pointed finger and Camus’s notion of “the absurd” lies mostly in the *noir* vision of fatality rather than the outcast position of a marginalised man found in the French narratives of this period. The dying comment from Nick Blake (John Garfield), “Nobody lives forever” (the words of the film’s title), at once existential and grimly reminiscent of the larger holocaust from which Blake has recently returned; or Swede’s (Burt Lancaster) dignified response to a sense of entrapment and isolation in *The Killers*, “Everybody dies...”, bear this out.

When he came to the United States in 1945, Jean-Paul Sartre saw *Citizen Kane* and disapproved of the use of flashbacks that Welles employed in his film, adding that “Orson Welles’s *oeuvre* well illustrated the drama of the American intelligentsia, which is rootless and totally cut off from the masses.” It was among the *noir* novel writers that these formulations of existentialism emerged as an important challenge to optimistic descriptions of American life. Their non-acceptance of the “vocabulary of normality” or familiarity was translated into descriptions of personal maladjustment in society – what Riesman referred to as “Tales of the Abnorm”. In other words, traditional Hollywood forms, like musicals, comedies or romances were definitely dismissed by *noir* novelists and hard-boiled writers of the forties. The feeling of disillusionment and the topic of social and physical deprivation were made more visible in this type of novel, normally showing archetypal

noir characters whose posture towards life and society in general was that of a victim. The rapid development of the pulp fiction market back in the forties was, as seen previously, the most significant contribution of the time to the phenomenon of the *noir* thriller.

III. Noir Thematics

1 Essential Elements in *Film Noir*

Of late there has been a trend in Hollywood toward the wholesale production of lusty, gut-and-gore crime stories, all fashioned on a theme with a combination of plausibly motivated murder and studded with high-powered Freudian implication. Of the quantity of such films in vogue, "Double Indemnity", "Murder, My Sweet", "Conflict" and "Laura" are a quartet of the most popular which quickly come to mind (...) This quartet constitutes a mere vanguard of the cinematic homicide to come. Every studio in town has at least two or three similar blood-freezers before the camera right now, which means that within the next year or so movie murder – particularly with a psychological twist – will become almost as common as the weekly newsreel or musical. (Shearer 1945:7)

This quotation makes two central assertions regarding *film noir*: that it is “a trend (...) with high-powered Freudian implication” and the “vanguard of the cinematic homicide.” To begin with, film directors of the forties and fifties did not know that they were making *noir* films. They would probably have called their productions crime thrillers but incontestably, as the French instantly noticed once these films were screened in postwar France, they were a vanguard. These films reflected a considerable change in the American psyche, very different from what the Europeans were used to seeing from the thirties. As for the “quartet” the quotation mentions, Curtis Bernhardt’s *Conflict* (1945) should be substituted by *The Maltese Falcon*, as although they both portray an uncommon mystery investigated by Humphrey Bogart, it was the latter that played a more determining role in the coinage of the term “*film noir*” by French cineastes.

Shearer further affirms in his article that these crime films were “homicidal” and “lusty” and filled with “gut-and-gore crime”, a judgement that might surprise modern audiences. He does not say that the major studios, Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, MGM and Warner Bros generally consigned their “crime films” to B-units and released them on the bottom half of double bills. The other majors – RKO, Universal and Columbia – were often more enthusiastic to show them off and valued them more. For the first group,

the idea was to maintain standards of quality since they produced high-cost films; however, for the second, these films constituted an accessible type of product that could attract an audience at a lower cost. To a degree, Hollywood (while overseeing all these aspects through a professional control over production and marketing) developed and transformed new measures for narrative elaboration and suppression. Among the many different factors that I describe throughout this work, the need to produce low budget films and be as creative within distinctive styles as possible contributed to the differentiation of product from that of the established A-films from the major studios. After the years of the Depression, a need to attract audiences back to the cinema was strongly felt, and thus B-film production as a part of double features exhibition became a calculated measure to redress the situation.

As I explain in the chapter “Censorship and Politics”, *film noir* is a form symptomatic of its own time and a reflection of production policies in both artistic and technological terms. With the emergence of B-films in the market, they were soon perceived by filmmakers as a cheaper way of being different and as an opportunity to experiment with cinema techniques. The demands of wartime production, together with the ideological shift that embraced the controversial issues mentioned before, led filmmakers and film personnel to turn to the production of *B-noirs*, in stark contrast to other standardised A-film forms which were much more in conformity with the requirements of the Motion Picture Production Code. On the other hand, in practical terms, the appearance of B-films not only meant customers were able to watch two different movies for the price of one single entrance but *film noir* also provided them with new sophisticated pleasures, with its generally masculine orientation, which would reveal itself to be successful in this changed context of reception.

Film noir became thus the form of choice for certain studio companies to survive and prosper by producing appealing adult entertainment throughout the forties. From the viewers’ perspective, this type of film challenged and unsettled the spectator, differentiating it from all other art forms. With this kind of complicit game at the emotional level, so to speak, the spectator obtains his or her satisfaction and pleasure mediated through a set of rules and conventions. We might enquire then why some studios manifested a dismissive attitude towards these films, while others were eager to maintain them. Part of the answer to this issue seems to be that this particular kind of alienation, with

its modernist sensibility, enabled *film noir* to embody a critical stance within popular cinema, which had customarily sought to reassure and comfort its audience. Spectators could see in *film noir* a fissure opening up and a space emerging not bounded by the usual rules and inhibitions.

Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton concluded that *film noir* with its “oneiric, bizarre, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel” vision was in consonance with the pessimism and angst felt widely in American society. Viewers would see their own feelings of distrust and anguish reflected in these *noir* movies, and therefore these elements, expressed in terms of their complex contradictions in motives and actions, would be brought out in interaction with the spectator. In this Part *III*, I thus seek to present the various elements that constitute the thematic contents (the city as jungle, the instability of sexual relations, corruption and perversity as endemic, etc) and motifs of *film noir*, and ultimately to comment on what these films tell us about American society of the forties at its most unvarnished.

1.1 Radical Individualism

This chapter brings to the fore the issue of radical individualism associated with crime / violence and personal greed since these form, as seen in Part II, the subtexts of pre-production code films of the thirties (with the gangster pictures, for instance). In many respects *film noir* represents a manifestation of fragmentation at the several levels described in the foregoing sections. Here I would like to concentrate on the individual, on the psychological disintegration of the *noir* protagonist, and simultaneously to reference other disruptive effects registered in *noir* productions.

Psychologically, therefore, the *noir* narrative is indeed an exploration of the personal identity crises of its protagonists. The many examples of films given so far that depict the dominant worldview in *noir* clearly express a paranoid and claustrophobic state of mind on the part of the main protagonist. The impersonality of *noir* cities, such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, is then transposed to the “inner city” of the hero’s imagination in which desperation and alienation seem to govern. The urban landscape shows no independent existence from the *noir* hero, but rather functions as a symbolic immoral correlative of the futile search for happiness, implying destruction of the self and that of others too. This hostile urban jungle is very similar to the personal jungles encountered in films like *Pitfall* or more strikingly in Robert Siodmak’s *Criss Cross*. Narrative devices reinforce how much the action of the *noir* characters are a product of fate and constrained by their troubled pasts. These devices further accentuate the doomed and desolate world characterised by predatory sexuality, darkness and violence and it all eventually translates into enigmas of personal identity which function as expository of or even as a form of psychoanalysis of the main character (adumbrating, fragmentation, fractional recovery, but then ultimate loss).

Thematically, the topic of fragmentation is emblematically expressed through the dissolution of the family unit like in *Pitfall*, this unit traditionally being the mainstay in American conservative cinema. The opening scenes of the film set up the life of John Forbes (Dick Powell) in terms of home, family and work. While his wife, Sue (Jane

Wyatt), cooks breakfast, domestic routine is depicted as a source of deep discontent for the husband / father. The protagonist's meeting with the fashion-model Mona Stevens (Lizabeth Scott) represents the critical moment in his defiant transgression and at the same time his possible rescue from a life of self-denial and limitation (in respect of the conflict that he goes through between his inner desires and his professional and family obligations). In this sense, *film noir* not only discarded values marked "American" but more significantly adduced few examples of meaningful social behaviour in everyday life.

In John Berry's *He Ran All the Way* (1951), the film uses the theme of a family trapped in their own home by hostile outside forces. John Garfield as Nick Robey is holding the family at gunpoint but he (symbolically) conveys the image of a wounded animal, of a man who has been rejected by his own family. This particular transgression is made explicit in other *noirs* like *Double Indemnity*, a discontented wife who murders her husband; *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Cora Smith's marriage means nothing to her but a boring and restless life, so murdering her husband is a real escape for her; *Dead Reckoning* (1947), with Coral Chandler who is keeping her marriage to the crime boss a secret and so manages to seduce Rip Murdock; or *The Lady from Shanghai* in which husband and wife seem to have an odious shared reason for wanting Michael O'Hara onboard ship.

By emphasising the pressing danger to the family unit, these *noirs* take the spectator into the main protagonists' minds firstly to understand why they want to escape from frustrating routine in their alienated existence, and secondly to make the viewer feel sympathetic to their final decisions. The non-traditional representation of the institution of family in *film noir* contributes therefore to legitimise individualistic social values, and it suggests that the husband has laid claim to being the hierarchical head and authority figure in society. From a feminist point of view, it might constitute a strong reminder that these women / wives were seeking a new position in the American society of the forties and fifties. After all, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) of *Double Indemnity* states it very clearly that her marriage makes her feel like a caged animal in her husband's home: "I feel as if he was watching me. Not that he cares, not *anymore*. But he keeps me on a leash so tight, I can't breathe." As Sylvia Harvey suggests, the lack of position and personal accomplishment in traditional marriage leads the *noir* woman to rebel:

Other imagery in these films suggests that a routinised boredom and a sense of stifling entrapment are characteristic of marriage (...). The family home in *Double Indemnity* is the place where three people who hate each other spend endlessly boring evenings together. The husband does not merely not notice his wife, he ignores her sexually (...). (Harvey 1998:43)

Politically and ideologically, *film noir* managed to resonate with American audiences and expressed concerns about social trends and injustices, shaped in part by contemporary social realities. This is made visible in *The Big Sleep* by Howard Hawks, which functions as a socio-political critique, or *Ministry of Fear* (1945) by Fritz Lang, through the framework of political intrigue surrounding World War II. The world in general and American society in particular are then depicted as politically and socially fragmented, which is then reflected in the films in another set of violations: corruption and vice.

The radical individualism that is felt in these films is essentially expressed through the sense of negativity that pervades most of them. The heroes' own desires are a toying with the dangers of transgression and constitute a threat to the institution of the family. Interestingly, apart from *Pitfall*, *noir* productions rarely depict images of parents and children, let alone the institution of the family seen as a defended fortress that outsiders attack at their peril. In fact, the family, religion, the State and education (major pillars of society) are all set at crisis point in *film noir*. As seen in the chapter regarding censorship, *noir* filmmakers became proficient in getting round the Code's regulations which promoted home and family values and upheld American legal, political and religious institutions. These illustrations of subversion clearly demonstrate that *film noir* intended to test the boundaries of what was allowable on the big screen and they also remind us of the strength that *noir* movies potentially had.

Noir movies reverberate with messages that seemingly conveyed the anxiety felt first in the economic pressures of the 1930s and then into the turbulent times of the forties with WWII and the disintegrating political certainties. This was mostly registered in a dramatic shift in sexuality and the male - female duality, breaking out as volatility in gender relations that unquestionably led to the anxiety addressed by *noir* concerning male authority and adequacy. *Noir* explored traditionalist values of individualism, the need to stand alone, and found it wanting despite there being no viable alternative. The heroic fatalism of *noir*'s characters was predicated on a shaky self-reliance, apart from all

structures of constituted authority, and most categorically distanced from law and propriety.

As I have mentioned in the chapter “The Gangster Film”, in this genre radical personal accomplishment was negatively depicted in contrast to what made a respectable society (this was one of the main means of expression that Hollywood used to reinstate the values of family and legal institutions and to discourage criminal or nonstandard behaviour). This radical individualism had to be eventually eliminated so as to safeguard the community values which were gradually being subverted in the early thirties. Culturally speaking, as seen before, the screen presence of these figures was envisaged as a potential danger to the reconstruction of social stability. *Film noir*’s exploration of themes of radical individualism retained an economic dimension but often blurred it with sexual fulfilment. This dark moral reversal can be seen as a risk-taking in both form and substance. While mood dominated *noir*, rather than plot, as a cinematic category *film noir* was constructed around frustrations and fears, psychological chaos and paranoia, all very often embodied in the troubling experience of defeat. As I said above, *film noir* worked against these idealised notions of family, community and public commitment, presenting rather a dark, apprehensive culture of aggressive opportunism.

Apart from being a remarkable movie from the point of view of narrative technique (the film is a multiple first-person narration and presents the same events seen from various perspectives), *The Big Clock* illustrates the individualism common in American society of the late forties and fifties. George Stroud (Ray Milland) gets caught in this web of circumstances and in the predicament of a wrongly-accused man. His ironic search for himself (he secretly carries out his own investigation) leads him to raise the possibility of his own moral guilt, and he feels convicted. As his fate appears to close in on him, he turns a cold eye on his marriage and his job, in both of which he feels trapped. The film accentuates thus the feeling of instability and precariousness of the normal everyday world, which is after all one of the core effects of the *noir* narrative.

It has been emphasised throughout this work that the topic of culpability seems to invade most *noir* productions, with protagonists living a fugitive existence in which every recess brings on terror. Bradford Galt (Mark Stevens) is the voice of most *noir* protagonists in *The Dark Corner*. As a private eye, just released from a San Francisco prison where, after being framed, he has served two years for manslaughter, Galt personifies the

uncertainty of the *noir* characters' situation, mired in existential despair. Henry Hathaway's message in this film is that crime can push us into a dark corner where we do not know what we are up against, as fig. 33 suggests (this excellent shot is one of the many impressive camera angles that interpret both the character's (inner) shadows and the merciless city itself). The title of the film comes from a cry of existential desperation as the protagonist turns to his caring secretary and remarks: "There goes my last lead. I feel all dead inside. I'm backed up in a dark corner and I don't know who's hitting me". Another similarly relevant quote that best sets the dark ironic mood of the film and this idea of individualism and existential anguish comes from Hardy Cathcart (Clifton Webb): "I hate the dawn. The grass always looks as though it has been left out all night".



Figure 33. *The Dark Corner*

In his pursuit of knowledge that promises salvation, Bradford Galt, just like other *noir* protagonists, starts a metaphoric search for a totalising explanation. However, in an existential world, where the concept of a simple truth can find no philosophical grounding, such a quest is condemned to failure.

1.2 Space and the Noir City

Film noir has drawn a lot of its strength from the pace and vertiginous effect of urbanisation in the first half of the twentieth-century. The momentous and sprawling construction of cities like New York, San Francisco and Chicago provided both theme and location for *noir* anomie and which became *de rigueur* features of the form. In particular, the city of Los Angeles, as the home of the film industry, has always been abundantly present in *film noir*. One might almost affirm that the novel of Hollywood and the Los Angeles novel were synonymous, judging from the way that the hard-boiled writers of the thirties projected their work onto the city, in screenplays to be used by the industry. In *The Little Sister* (1949), Raymond Chandler vividly mapped the crime novel defining Los Angeles's "mean streets" as those down which a man must go, a "mail order city, everything in the catalogue you could get better somewhere else (...) the riffraff of a big hard-boiled city with no more personality than a paper cup" (in MacShane 1995:210). Metaphorically, Chandler manages to cast a disreputable pall over this city through the sardonic views of his characters, notably Marlowe, who finds only "grafters and con men and female bandits" on the streets of L.A. The complicity of the city with dark doings appears thus to be different in kind from the frantic action and grittiness of the movies of the past decade (namely of the gangster films).

Los Angeles's unique city-shape became one of the first settings to be exploited in *film noir*, following the adaptations of Raymond Chandler and James M. Cain. The grand recklessness of downtown's Bunker Hill present in Chandler's narratives soon displaced the bungalows and suburbs of Cain's crime novels. Bunker Hill, a popular film setting, stands in fact as an ambiguous aesthetic symbol (that of the decay at the heart of the metropolis) in the *noirs* of that time, and was used as a location for such *noirs* as *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Criss Cross*. Such locations were posited as a yearning for lost unity and amenity, and were seen as both real / urban and moody / mysterious at the same time. They seemed to serve the purpose of the *noir* context, as they embodied rough authenticity with simultaneously an air of menace and a certain impenetrability. They were thus an ideal venue for neurotic entrapment.

Yet, we cannot ignore the fact that L.A., with the presence of its cinema industry, the abundance of equipment suppliers, laboratories, and film schools also made independent production possible, as was the case with micro-budget *noir* Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour*. For the European filmmakers, fleeing from the war, Hollywood presented for them the opportunity to work in different parts of the American movie industry (as technicians, cinematographers and directors). The style of German Expressionism they brought along with them, combined with the gradual relaxation of the Hays code as the war progressed, allowed more latitude in film content. This made Hollywood cinema receptive to a mood and style characteristic of *film noir* of the forties, which very often would contain an urban setting in their film plots. Émigrés like Billy Wilder were particularly sensitive to L.A. architecture and its pretentiousness, as we can see from the opening scenes of *Double Indemnity*. Indeed, many *noir* productions included the word "city" in their titles (see p. 411), perhaps as a reflection of or response to the mushroom-like growth of US cities. This was actually widely perceived at the time:

It's fast becoming a rule that if a studio isn't making a picture with the name of a city in a title the studio isn't adhering to the call of the times. At least half a dozen pictures currently are in production with such titles, and a number of others either have recently been completed or are about to take off. (in *Daily Variety*, May 4, 1944)

The *film noir* cycle also explores the urban milieu that emerges as the product of intersecting cultural, cinematic, and technological discourses. First, the typical *noir* protagonists present in these films operate by means of a deceitful force, which is found in the metropolis, with its rootless and unreliable women and the promise of easy and ill-gotten money. One might cite the example of *Naked City*, where Jules Dassin weaves an exciting tapestry of characters that move about in the real streets of New York. The *noir* city gets "naked" as the film evolves only to reveal its verisimilitude and the immediacy of potential violence and crime. This use of "centripetal space", as Dimendberg calls it in relation to the first part of the *noir* cycle, with films set largely in New York, helps to understand the representation of urban space in *film noir*. In the case of *Naked City*, it is not so much "the grittiness of the street" that is relevant as its illustration of the neurotic mass. After all, as Dimendberg quotes Georg Simmel, "the modern city entails learning to ignore

other people and developing a calculated indifference to the bodies with which one shares public transportation and the street” (Dimendberg 2004:22).

Secondly, social instability caused by the breakup of traditional beliefs and patterns of behaviour portrayed through the spatiality in *film noir* is shown to be historical and material rather than merely existential. As Edward Dimendberg puts it:

Though frequently analyzed in relation to political conflicts of postwar America, film noir has often been studied in isolation from the geographic dynamics of the period. Treating the city as expression of some underlying myth, theme, or vision has tended to stifle the study of spatiality in film noir as a historical *content* as significant as its more commonly studied formal and narrative features. (Dimendberg 2004:9)

Dimendberg’s analysis is an attempt to reconstruct the *noir* philosophy of despair around the notion that results from the success of form over content. It tries to draw some interesting parallels with contemporary theories of spatiality, and articulating them with a “space of representation”. Thus, often adapted from crime stories set in the metropolis, *film noir* possesses a literary background that explains its enduring anxiety with the menacing but captivating city. Its powerful and inescapable presence in *noir* productions is indeed derived from the hard-boiled writers whose novels already involved the representation of specific spatialities. Whether conveying the spirit of Hammett’s San Francisco, Chandler’s Los Angeles, or New York neighbourhoods such as Greenwich Village, the spatial movement of the *noir* protagonists varies in these films. We can observe this in a set of *noirs* such as *This Gun for Hire*, where we see Phillip Raven moving from San Francisco to Los Angeles in an effort to get even with Gates for setting him up; *Detour* in which Al Roberts leaves New York for Los Angeles in search of the “stardom” in Hollywood; or, Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, a drifter that lands up in a small California roadside café. In the striking opening to *Possessed* (1947), for instance, Louise Howell Graham (Joan Crawford) wanders dazed through a real downtown Los Angeles asking for “David” as if in a trance. The empty streets, the tall, silent buildings, the oblique, early morning light which casts elongated shadows and the use of rain-streaked windows are all a ghostly projection of her tormented character, blurring the distinction between reality and Louise’s imagination.

The opposite, that is moving from the city to the country, also occurs in films such as Tourneur’s *Out of the Past* to be analysed later, or in Mann’s *Desperate* (1947), which

shows a young married couple in a frantic escape from the city to an isolated farm in the country. In Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*, Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden) longs to go back home and back to his childhood farm which he once had to leave behind for a life of organised crime in the city. In Nicholas Ray's *On Dangerous Ground*, Jim Wilson (Robert Ryan) plays a New York policeman incapable of controlling his aggressive impulses. This life has made him bitter and violent so he is sent to a rural community upstate expecting that a less hectic setting will have a restorative effect. The fruit orchards of Dassin's *Thieves' Highway* (1949) seem to be no refuge to Nick Garcos (Richard Conte) from networks of criminal corruption. In Ray's *They Live by Night*, two young lovers, Bowie (Farley Granger) and Keechie (Cathy O'Donnell) attempt to move away from their established criminal lives, hiding out in farmhouses, cabins, and other rural locations in the South of the country (indeed, the film is set exclusively in the country, a significant exception to the majority of *noirs*). In all these films there is a sense of hopelessness in this physical / spatial change which, for different reasons, completely takes them into the *noir* sphere. At climatic moments of their plots, these movies show that the *noir* style and the urban context combine well together, not only in terms of technical effects such as high-contrast lighting (which suits enclosed spaces with flat walls and artificial light sources, for example), but also as a way of introducing the urban *noir* hero, who struggles to survive in the city but cannot altogether leave it.

The narratives of these films make it clear that such a hopeful ending is rarely an option, supporting the *noir* visual treatment of despair and its subversive implications, as well as the individual journey (both physical -from city to country- and metaphorically – inner journey) of the *noir* protagonist. Diverse uses of rurality and small-town life are made in *film noir*, hinting at the existence of places of decency and traditional values, but at the same time it shows how the rural can be drawn into a shelter for criminality. This visual treatment of the countryside in *film noir* actually confronts the romantic exaltation of the rural space as a place of moral integrity and a repository of good values.

Film noir's perception of the city is strongly rooted in the lower side of modern urban life and its night-time lonely desperation. In John H. Auer's *City That Never Sleeps* (1953), the metropolis, deploying both a sardonic and sentimental tone as the "Voice of Chicago", actually narrates its own tale:

I am the city. Hub and heart of America. Melting pot of every race, creed, color, and religion in humanity. From my famous stockyards to my towering factories, from my tenement district to swank Lake Shore Drive, I am the voice, the heartbeat, of this giant, sprawling sordid and beautiful, poor and magnificent citadel of civilization. And this is the story of just one night in the great city. Now meet my citizens...

The City promptly introduces us to the motifs of self-debasement, disorientation, and dehumanisation, so typical of the *noir* cycle, and its stock characters: the exhausted cop, the fraudulent businessman, the psychotic crook, the conniving wife, or the lovelorn loser, personified by Sgt Joe (Chill Wills). In the same line of thought about the city, seen from a nocturnal angle, Nicholas Christopher mentions that “walking through a city like New York or Los Angeles is like walking through a dream – or nightmare” (Christopher 1997:45), emphasising *noir* cinema’s central motif as the (night) urban labyrinth in which the *noir* hero embarks on a dangerously quest. Alain Silver and James Ursini also conclude that:

Dream and reality are the touchstones of film noir. Los Angeles is where the filmmakers of the classic period brought these elements together, created the emotional conundrums which the noir protagonist must confront - the land of opportunity and the struggle to get by, the democratic ideal and the political corruption, the disaffection of veterans who gave up the best years of their lives. (Silver & Ursini 2005:13)

The process appears to be painful and often convoluted for the *noir* hero, attempting to regain a new perspective on city life. In films such as *Out of the Past* the *noir* city contrasts with a redemptive countryside. In *On Dangerous Ground*, as seen, where despair is written on the anguished face of Jim Wilson (Robert Ryan), who drives through wintry countryside in daylight, and the city streets at night. The film is both psychologically realistic and spiritually mysterious, but clearly reworks the city / country dichotomy, especially when the character’s emotional state is also expressed through subjective shots of the road as Wilson drives. Finally, it suggests that the distraught cop is humanised by the country in a way that he could not be in the city.

The type of criminality and passions that many *noir* protagonists manifest comes from the insecurity of (their) existence; at the same time the city is definitely the place to pursue their obsessions. This resolution can be deeply problematic for the *noir* character, but, as Robert Warshow wrote, “there is only the city [for them]; not the real city, but that

dangerous and sad city of the imagination which is so much more important, which is the modern world” (Warshow 1972:131). King Vidor’s *Beyond the Forest* (1949) reinforces even more the complexity of these contrasting value systems. Rosa Moline (Bette Davis), unhappy with her home and marriage to a small-town doctor, demands that her husband’s patients pay their bills so that she can use the money for a trip to the city of Chicago, otherwise, she claims: “If I don’t get out of here, I’ll die; if I don’t get out of here, I hope I die”. The countryside is certainly not idyllic for Rosa, and the aspiring city is perceived by her as a place of hope for a better life, which will put an end to her own sense of oppression. After many tumultuous episodes (stressed by the visuals which repeatedly capture her crazed behaviour), the city becomes noirishly twisted, hostile, and a place of despair for Rosa, and eventually the place where she dies.

In conclusion, the city in *film noir* is never presented in a neutral manner, never simply an amorphous background. It takes part in and defines the action, comments on the characters as seen above, and supplies mood and tension. *Noir* films reproduce thus the urban landscape, both physically and emotionally, making the American city an indissociable factor of *film noir*. The architectural excess found in these cities (one only need recall Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* with its magnificent shots of the expansive city) evoke the incredible construction boom that characterised the first forty years of the century but which also occurred sociologically, creating mass migrations and new unrooted communities. We can finally say that these *noir* films showing the great, sprawling American city, constantly in transformation, both fabulous and sordid, changed our perception of it and our feelings about it. Over the past hundred years, the modern megapolis has had an incalculable impact on all the arts and on popular styles, and *noir* was one of the first forms to register and concentrate on its alienating effects.

1.3 Trouble With Girls: The Femme Fatale

Perhaps the feature of *noir* which has attracted the most attention in the last thirty years or so has been the *femme fatale*. These women represent a subversive view and a direct challenge to traditional womanhood and family life, contrasting with the “good girl”. Sylvia Harvey argues, however, that as alive, independent and defiant as these women are, they “exert a much more powerful hold on our imagination” when compared to traditional females:

(...) the ideological safety valve device that operates in the offering of women as sexual commodities breaks down in probably most of these films, because the women are not, finally, possessed. Walter Neff, in *Double Indemnity*, summarises the position of many of the *film noir* men when he concludes: ‘I didn’t get the woman and I didn’t get the money.’ The same statement would be true for the men of *Scarlet Street* (1945), *They Live by Night* (1949), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) and *Gun Crazy* (1949). (Harvey 1998:40)

Harvey draws attention to one of the major hallmarks of *noir* being the characteristic treatment of sexual desire and sexual relationships and a distinctive range of male and female character types which help to define *noir*. These elements, she adds, can be related directly to contemporary social and cultural trends, and many of these socio-cultural themes are actually recurrent in *noir* ideological significance. As Neale notes, they “include the wartime mobilisation of women and men, with its subsequent disruption of gender roles, and post-war cultural readjustments. Much critical discussion of *film noir*’s socio-cultural meanings finds parallels in these contexts in *noir*’s representation of gender and sexuality” (in Hanson 2007:2). In a patriarchal culture, persistent anxiety about the modern woman created the *femme fatale* as a central figure and it has been interpreted as a symptom of male sexual unease. Sylvia Harvey points out that:

In the world of symbolic searches, exchanges and satisfactions created by these movies, women are accorded the function of an ideological safety valve, but this function is ambivalent. Presented as prizes, desirable objects, they seem to offer a temporary satisfaction to the men of *film noir*. In the (false) satisfactions that they represent, they might be seen to prevent the mood of despondency and loss,

characteristic of these films, from being translated into an understanding and analysis of the conditions that *produce* the sense of alienation and loss. (Harvey 1998:40)

Harvey uses the expression “an ideological safety valve” for the role of *noir* women since they represent an explicit challenge to postwar men by being assertive and self-assured. In refusing to play the role of devoted mother and wife that mainstream society prescribes for her, the classic *femme fatale* resorts to murder as a way to free herself from an insufferable relationship with a man / husband that sees her as his own property or as a “desirable object”. This brings the “ur-narrative” of *film noir* into the male exploration of the *femme fatale*’s enigma, making it a matter of urgency and importance to all men. This also challenges the unequal distribution of power within the heterosexual couple, reinforcing what I have mentioned in the chapter on “Postwar Readjustment”, and bears out the difficulty that the returning veterans had in patronizing movies that would show women who gained so much social and economic influence in real life.

Returning to the idea of the “ideological safety valve”, it is worth noting that the forties were an era of mainstream “women’s pictures” and it may be no coincidence that so many cinematographic productions of that period exhibited the *femme fatale* with her associated psychopathology as a counterpoint, as feminist criticism about the politics of Hollywood representation and interpretation show. In a world of action defined in masculine terms, the image of the *femme fatale* helps to project male anxieties about women. Ideologically, the *noir* fatal woman represents a determined attempt by American filmmakers to portray women in a new, if harsh, way. However, the Hollywood industry seems to contradict this outlook, trying to reflect America’s elemental promise of confidence, wealth, and social well-being. In this regard, Janey Place focuses upon this division between the two poles of female archetypes, in which sexuality is the terrain of both female agency and female threat:

Film noir is a male fantasy, as is most of our art. Thus woman here as elsewhere is defined by her sexuality: the dark lady has access to it and the virgin does not (...) women are defined *in relation to* men, and the centrality of sexuality in this definition is a key to understanding the position of women in our culture. The primary crime the ‘liberated’ woman is guilty of is refusing to be defined in such a way, and this refusal can be perversely seen (...) as an attack on men’s very existence. *Film noir* is hardly ‘progressive’ in these terms (...) but it does give us one of the few periods of film in which women are active, not static symbols, are

intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality. (Place 1998:47)

Many feminists, such as Christine Gledhill, affirm that the reaction of American women to the war reflected a frustration with traditional gender roles and that *film noir* portrayed many of its females in a depreciative way. These approaches are established on the basis of *film noir* being a male genre, picturing a male field of action and control, where female agency is articulated via transgressive desire. Still, even though they might be seen as scapegoats for the problems in society, these women changed their place in society and in the case of the *femme fatale* depicted in *noirs* she represents the ultimate insidious misogynistic fantasy. Other *noir* productions offer counterpoints which work in opposition to the *femme fatale*: the innocent-looking housewife who sees her role as a support and consolation for her man. As seen before, in *Pitfall*, John Forbes (Dick Powell), fed up with the routine of his existence, craves excitement in his ordinary everyday life away from his wife and high school sweetheart, Sue Forbes, (Jane Wyatt), and gets involved with model Mona Stevens (Lizabeth Scott). Again, Jane Wyatt provides the image of the stereotypical wife and mother (fig. 34) and a visual contrast to Lizabeth Scott in a reversal of the classic “dark” women in *film noir*.



Figure 34. *Pitfall*

Writing a misleading report of an embezzlement case as a pretext for spending some time with the sultry blonde, the couple of the film finds themselves stalked and threatened

by a jealous (and suspicious) ex-cop, MacDonald (Raymond Burr), as the image below shows (fig. 35). In that regard, Schwartz underlines that Powell acts out to be the decent American middle-class husband:

Powell is the archetypal average American man living (...) in the suburbs, where his type is viewed as the backbone of the country. This film does a good job of poking holes in that dream, showing underneath the surface all is not well. The wayward husband has fallen from his perch of bourgeois respectability in the eyes of his wife, and the materialism needed to maintain such a middle-class lifestyle (...). (Schwartz 2001:2)



Figure 35. *Pitfall*

These two female archetypes presented in the film reinforce the socio-cultural dichotomy mentioned above and the ideological significance of *film noir*. In fact, much

significant discussion of *film noir*'s socio-cultural meanings rotates round *noir*'s demonstration of gender and sexuality, as Stephen Neale notes:

For many commentators, the principal hallmarks of *noir* include a distinctive treatment of sexual desire and sexual relationships, a distinctive array of male and female character types, and a distinctive repertoire of male and female traits, ideals, characteristics and forms of behaviour. For some these elements can be related directly to contemporary social and cultural trends and factors; they help not only to define *noir*, but also to account for its existence. (Neale 2000:151)

Some further examples, such as Ellen Norson (Cathy O'Donnell) in *Side Street* (1950) or Nettie (Colleen Gray) in *Kiss of Death* (1947), also portray women who appear as antithetical to the *femme fatale*, often appearing in the same film, as a figure of the innocent homemaker or playing the role of *femme attrapée* or domestic menial. This also suggests how difficult it is for *film noir* to represent an upright and secure family life; conversely, the form embodies the compulsion that exists to transgress the boundaries of family ties.⁵² *Femmes fatales* such as Barbara Stanwyck's Phyllis Dietrichson (*Double Indemnity*), Lana Turner's Cora Smith (*The Postman Always Rings Twice*), Ava Gardner's Kitty Collins (*The Killers*) or Rita Hayworth's Gilda Farrell (*Gilda*) are all the exaltation of a legendary femininity. The way they exert their control over men shows a gender role reversal which became very frequent in *noir* productions. Harvey also echoes this point of view:

Despite the ritual punishment of acts of transgression, the vitality with which these acts are endowed produces an excess of meaning which cannot finally be contained. Narrative resolutions cannot recuperate their subversive significance. (Harvey 1998:39)

It is not surprising, then, to see all these *noir* women, such as Kathie (*Out of the Past*) or Cora, with their liveliness, wield a much more powerful hold on our imagination and our memory. Other examples of female-dominated *noirs* are those involving Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney) in *Laura*, Mildred Pierce in *Mildred Pierce*, Gilda (Rita Hayworth) in *Gilda*, Martha Ivers (Barbara Stanwyck) in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), or Nora Prentiss (Ann Sheridan) in *Nora Prentiss* (1947), for example. As Helen Hanson notes, these productions actually contain central female characters who were "involved in

⁵² This is what happens in Luchino Visconti's neo-realist *Obsessione* (1942), which was an unauthorised film version of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946).

the films' production, in the roles of writing sources or novels, as adaptors or screenwriters, or as female directors or female producers" (Hanson 2007:7). Such films, moreover, portray female points of view in complex ways which question the abovementioned polarity of *noir* female characterisation.

Just as *noirs* are more about the *how* rather than the *what* in their crime detection plots and with their *femmes fatales*, we understand that at the end of the film they are caught and eventually die, and yet it is the way that they die that makes an impression on us. Feminist work on *film noir* and gender, such as that by Christine Gledhill and Janey Place, demonstrate this. Gledhill argues that in *film noir* "certain highly formalized inflections of plot, character and visual style dominated at the expense of (...) comprehensive solution of crime (...) which offer[s] a world of action defined in male terms: the locales, situations, iconography, violence" (Gledhill 1998:27). All these are indeed conventions suggesting the male domain:

Women in this world tend to split into two categories: there are those who work on the fringes of the underworld and are defined by the male criminal ambience of the thriller – bar-flies, night-club singers, expensive mistresses, *femmes fatales*, and ruthless gold-diggers who marry and murder rich old men for their money; and then there are women on the outer margins of this world, wives, long-suffering girl-friends, would-be fiancés who are victims of male crime, sometimes the object of the hero's protection, and often points of vulnerability in his masculine armour. (Gledhill 1998:28)

When discussing about *film noir* and its potential classification in the genre debate, the role of the *femme fatale* has to be considered since she is characterised as unknowable. This fact further accentuates her sexuality and brings a new range of female characters of the forties out from the shadows. Marie Ann Doane describes in a particularly interesting way the *noir femme fatale* and the issue of knowledge and its possibility or impossibility, articulated through matters of femininity and visibility:

In the classical Hollywood cinema, there are two types of films within which the contradictions involved in the patriarchal representation of woman become most acute – melodrama and *film noir*. Of the two, it is *film noir* which establishes a disturbance of vision as the premise of the film's signifying system. The lighting style implies a distortion of an originally clear and readable image and the consequent crisis of vision. Since the epistemological cornerstone of the classical text is the dictum, "the image does not lie", *film noir* tends to flirt with the limits of this system, the guarantee of its readability oscillating between an image which often conceals a great deal and a voice-over which is not always entirely credible.

Nevertheless, the message is quite clear – unrestrained female sexuality constitutes a danger. Not only to the male but to the system of signification itself. Woman is “the ruin of representation”. (Doane 1991:103)

The author states at this point that *Gilda* stands as a good example in this respect of an “object for the gaze” and therefore the parallelism between visibility and the knowable, or “the image does not lie”; the fascination of the film rests upon the continual flirtation with perception, as Doane suggests above. Women like Gilda seem to have come to symbolise America’s “stylised” vision of itself, and a distorted rendering of the new social role for women. They became a cultural expression of the mental disturbance the country was going through at a time of uncertainties and sociological changes. By using their sexual allure and feminine wiles, these deadly women came to battle male stereotyping (they actually replace an irrationally positive stereotype with an irrationally negative one). They contradict the idea that “a woman with a gun is like a man with a knitting needle”;⁵³ in short, in ascribing to them the “male” power (represented figuratively, for example, in the obvious phallic metaphor of guns in *Gun Crazy*), screenwriters, often working for the hard-boiled school, made them a captivating and powerful representative of a new type of American woman.

In conclusion, female narrative agency indicates a variety of female roles in the *noir* crime thriller that extends beyond the merciless *femme fatale* and the passive, domestic figure. Moreover, “the figure’s enigmatic qualities stimulate the central narrative drive, which comes from the desire to understand her motivations and thereby to reassert the rational control of the male ego, an impossible project” (Spicer 2002:91). It could be argued that all the above socio-cultural contexts allow different perspectives on these *noir* productions, especially in terms of their multiple contexts, sources and influences and characters. These contexts set down new questions of *noir*’s *Zeitgeist* mentioned earlier, its gender relations, and particularly its angle on women.

⁵³ Said by Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas) in *Out of the Past*.

1.4 Pursuing Justice:

The Private Eye, the Homme Fatal and the Homme Attrapé

This chapter looks at the hard-boiled detective as a key iconographic figure in *film noir*, particularly as exemplified by Humphrey Bogart in his performances as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* and Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*. Operating among government agents, killers and crooks, these conflicted hard-boiled private eyes were often morally-ambiguous figures themselves although usually possessed of a redeeming and distinctly sardonic personality. At the same time, I intend to analyse the male counterpart to the deadly female and the opposite of the male victim. An exciting combination of sly, manipulative charm and deep-rooted sexual sadism, the *homme fatal* can have connotations of sexual perversity as well as showing signs of impotence, sexually repressed or deviant behaviour. Finally, I will also make an analysis of the *homme attrapé* involved in both the acquiescence and resistance to societal demands. In short, I will examine the male archetypes in *noirs*, offering a reading of masculinity in *film noir*.

Noir characterisation of the detective role evolved in Hollywood *noir* productions especially if we compare the early and the mid-forties with the early fifties. Although the detective was maintained throughout the *noir* forties, the character seemed to become progressively more susceptible and flawed. *Noir* started to embody another form, oriented more towards helplessness and paranoia. Taking the example of Woolrich's novels and stories that were made into films (eleven in total from 1942 to 1949), we see lone wolves and petty criminals and murderers, but the emphasis is now put not so much on the detectives as on the defenceless characters caught up in the action. For instance, Vince Grayson (DeForest Kelley) is hypnotised into thinking he is a murderer in *Fear in the Night* (1947), or John Triton (Edward G. Robinson) is a mind-reader who predicts his own death in *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1947) or Frank Bigelow (Edward O'Brien) is the poisoned protagonist hunting his own killers in *D.O.A.* (1950), who hears the officer at the L.A. Homicide Bureau telling him "I don't think you fully understand, Bigelow. You've been murdered."

Another example of the evolution of the gumshoe is to be found in Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, who was often portrayed by different actors, each of whom brought out dissimilar, sometimes unexpected, aspects of the sleuth, giving us a chance to see how the character was inflected across time. Dick Powell in *Murder, My Sweet* stars as the down-and-out private investigator in this tangled story of intrigue; Humphrey Bogart assumes the role of hard-boiled private detective Marlowe character in the puzzling and complex Howard Hawks' classic, *The Big Sleep*.⁵⁴ In this film, the spectator is not forced to identify with the hero, and the *noir* convention of the world-weary hero's voiceover is effectively avoided here. This allows the viewer to speculate about what the detective is up to rather than Marlowe, through voiceover, guiding us subjectively through what he is indeed thinking. In stark contrast to this, director and star Robert Montgomery was Philip Marlowe in *Lady in the Lake*, experimentally filmed from the protagonist's first-person point of view. As already mentioned, this was the most revolutionary version of Chandler at that time, in which the camera becomes an active participant so that the viewer follows the story through the eyes of the private detective. Yet, this time, the Marlowe detective plays a relatively more predictable role revolving round the resolution of a mystery story very similar to many other films from the period.

Although usually emasculated as in the case of Bart Tare in *Gun Crazy* or Christopher Cross in *Scarlet Street*, or rendered vulnerable (Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* or Eddie Rice in *The Crooked Way*), the ambiguous man functioning as detective can also be the malefactor or the problem, not just the victim. The male protagonist in *film noir* can be an *homme fatal* and just like his counterpart, the *femme fatale*, they both have to pay for their excessive desires with their own lives or freedom. In Anthony Mann's *Raw Deal* (1948), Joe Sullivan (Dennis O'Keefe), an escaped con, inverts the usual sequence of a woman drawing an innocent man into her web. In this film Joe exists as an *homme fatal*, seducing Ann Martin (Marsha Hunt) into his world of violence and murder (fig. 36), "enticing her with the promise of sexual fulfilment that goes beyond the realm of normal relationships. She surrenders completely to Joe, committing murder as the ultimate expression of her love" (Silver & Ward 1992:238-9). The film follows a love triangle, marked straight from the beginning when both Pat (Claire Trevor) and Ann go and visit Joe

⁵⁴ Robert Mitchum again starred as Philip Marlowe in the 1978-version of *The Big Sleep* – a remake of Howard Hawks' 1946 film, casting Candy Clark and Sarah Miles as the two Sternwood daughters and Oliver Reed as corrupt gangster Eddie Mars.

in prison. As an *homme fatal*, Joe is also fatal to himself, especially in his bold and desperate escape from prison.

Some classic *noirs* also include another male archetype in their plots who is not necessarily a private detective: the *homme attrapé*, who usually does not oppose the demands of society and very often survives. The mysterious but charming Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) in *Shadow of a Doubt* constitutes a good example when he first tries to win over his niece, Young Charlie (Teresa Wright), and this is already done telepathically as they both share the same name and the same thoughts. They are indeed the two sides of the same personality: the shadow and the light or the good and evil. However, as the niece investigates her uncle regarding the *Merry Widow Waltz* case (the leitmotif for Uncle Charlie and his serial murders), she is gradually alienated by her uncle (fig. 37), and soon Uncle Charlie's deceptions make him a *noir homme attrapé* as his niece is now determined to bring him to justice. In one of the classic sequences of the film, it is the murderous Charlie rather than the virtuous one who falls prey to a passing speeding locomotive.



Figure 36. *Raw Deal*



Figure 37. *Shadow of a Doubt*

The male leads in these two films, *Raw Deal* and *Shadow of a Doubt*, display similar characteristics although they have different degrees of success. In both cases, the two men make some effort to secure their future, but Uncle Charlie seems to deploy a solid but attractive passivity (as a charming misanthropist and misogynist). However still, in both films, the two men have their own distinctive *modus operandi* of seducing and

deceiving women. Like many of their female counterparts, these *hommes attrapés* reflect a doomed relationship, either with the women who surround them or even with the kind of life they lead. The *femme attrapée* and the *homme attrapé* wind up together, just as they do in *The Killers*, and unlike the other male protagonists in the two films above, the *attrapé* couple manages to survive. The convoluted story of Swede's (Burt Lancaster) involvement with Kitty (Ava Gardner) seems to typify the *fatal* couple, contrasting with *homme attrapé* Lubinsky (Sam Levene) who marries Lilly (Virginia Christine). The film also uses the character of the investigator (Riordan played by Edmund O'Brien) who uses the situation of Swede and Lubinsky to move beyond the boring routine of his job and enter a world of corruption and chaos. Yet, unlike the private detective characters played by Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*, the investigator in this film as well as in *film noir* arouses almost no interest.

There has also been some critical discussion about the mixed signals sent out concerning masculinity and homosexuality in *film noir*. Although the Production Code of the forties did not allow the depiction of homosexuals, many *noirs* did depict situations or sequences in which implicitly gay characters were treated with a combination of disapproval and fascination. In many cases, the subtextual implications of homosexuality are used in films in which the male characters are either threatening women, or appear as villains in a hazily defined abnormal context. Many critics have suggested that *noir* in general expresses "a certain anxiety over the existence and definition of masculinity and normality" (in Kaplan 1998:115) and the presence of characters loosely marked as gay or effeminate represents an intensification of the representation of sexual perversion common in this film form.

The novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were filled with latently homosexual protagonists. The insinuatingly weak character of Joel Cairo played by Peter Lorre in *The Maltese Falcon* (fig. 38), daintily dressed, crimped hair and perfume, is clearly effeminate (even more so in the novel where Cairo is referred to as "queer" and as "the fairy"), but, due to the rules from the Hays Office, this was downplayed considerably. In many cases, the *noir* protagonist assumes a role which is undercut by the way he interacts with other men, by his masochistic attitude towards women, or simply by showing weakness at key moments. Several *noirs* adapt different strategies to hint at homosexuality and to challenge ideas of what constitutes normative masculine behaviour. This is the case

of *The Big Combo*, and the homosexual relationship between Mingo and Fante, which is no less explicitly intertwined with the violence they inflict than Bart and Annie Laurie's attraction to each other is in *Gun Crazy* (films by Joseph H. Lewis – see Part IV). Some other protagonists like the acid-tongued columnist Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) in *Laura* or Johnny's aggressive behaviour in *Gilda* seem symptomatic of pain over compounded rejections; or the psychotic Bruno (Robert Walker) in *Strangers on a Train*, with his forceful and insinuating homoerotic undertones (expressed in his crude (Freudian) hatred for his father and overprotection by his mother).



Figure 38. *The Maltese Falcon*

In trying to escape the censors' scissors, intimations of homosexuality were created either by the use of symbolic tools (especially weapons like revolvers and guns as a reference to the male organ) or by using cinematographic techniques (such as close-ups, slow motion and lighting) reflecting glances and gestures which stand for desires and subtexts that cannot be expressed in words. Any discussion of *film noir* has implicitly to acknowledge the function of sexuality as an intrinsic driving force in its narrative patterns. Some critics go so far as to argue that there would be no *film noir* without aggressive sexual provocation, which leads these dramas to their destructive ends. I would also add that even when *film noir* is overtly demonising of both women or homosexuals, it nevertheless still paved the way for psychoanalytic and "deconstructive critical discourse" that have laid bare the strategy of scapegoating which underpins popular cultural forms.

Either as a *femme fatale* or an *homme fatal*, the power of psycho-sexual impulses in *noir* protagonists in all their ambiguity is undeniable, and apparently there is a good reason for that, as Andrew Dickos notes:

As the cautionary cinema of the great negation of a “healthy” puritanical American vision, the film noir almost mandates a depiction, however perverse, of those repressed impulses reigning hand-in-hand with the anarchy that drives its protagonist to violence and paranoia. Unrepressed sexuality alongside these characteristics is far too messy to contain, so it must be vanquished. When it is particularly threatening, one may be sure that there is a woman involved. (Dickos 2002:144-5)

The repression of these impulses is part of the hero's claim to strength to be asserted and approved rather than merely being assumed by the *noir* protagonist. The testing assumes there is something weak or unstable to be tested, and this is “despite the fact that [*noir*] films are characterised by an overt masculinisation of both language (the aggressive and competitive ‘hard-boiled’ banter) and action (the predominance of violence)” (Krutnik 1991:88). For example, *Dead Reckoning* depicts Rip Murdock (Humphrey Bogart), as the *noir* hero who becomes at once the hunted and the hunter in his doomed romance with Coral Chandler (Lizabeth Scott). Beaten and hunted like an animal, Rip then confronts Coral. They both get into a car and drive off at high speed, when Coral attempts to kill him. Just after shooting him, the car crashes and this also proves fatal for the corrupted Coral Chandler. In *noir* productions like *Detour* or *The Dark Corner*, both protagonists seem to offer a clear denial of the conventional route of heroic masculine adventure. In *Detour*, Al Roberts voyages metaphorically to an understanding of his immediate present through images and the sound of his own voice, in a sort of symbolic castration; whereas in *The Dark Corner*, the narrative acquires deterministic overtones of hopelessness and Galt's affliction reinforces his instability and constitutes a cry of existential anguish.

In conclusion, when outlining and analysing the representation of masculinity in *film noir*, it is possible to recognise different categories of masculine identity defined in relation to the male's mission in the film. Therefore, this identity can either be related to a legal framework (as Frank Krutnik notes, “the private eye occupies a mediating position between the worlds of crime and legitimate society” (Krutnik 1991:92)) and to the law of patriarchy or often as a transgression of the law and the male has consequently to suffer

from his own actions. Hence, I have first identified the professional detective, the man who tries to reinstate order (and in so doing to validate his identity), such as the case of private detectives played by Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*.

Then, I have described the *homme fatal* who clearly wants to get away with his “standard” existence even if that means that he has to die. As seen in the case of *The Dark Corner*, Bradford Galt is the private eye hero who seeks to escape from his social commitments and ends up being stripped of any sense of triumph. His mixture of shrewd and calculating charm is often combined with rooted sexual sadism and therefore frequently found in the Gothic *noirs*, for example *Gaslight*, *Experiment Perilous* (1944) and *My Name is Julia Ross* (1945). The *homme fatal* also regularly shows signs of sexual perversity: the relentless and obsessive investigating officer, Lt Ed Cornell (Laird Cregar), in *I Wake Up Screaming* (1942), the well-dressed Alexander Grandison (Claude Rains) in *The Unsuspected* (1947) and fraudulent radio personality Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) in *Laura*. All of these three male protagonists are portrayed as being gripped by a sexual obsession, which can either be repressed (for example, Grandison’s appetite for death and deception is fed by his radio mystery programmes) or deviant (Lydecker’s dandified effeminacy). Finally, the *homme attrapé* can either be the hero, usually with the help of a woman, who becomes engaged in either an obstinate or an unintentional transgression of the law (Al Roberts in *Detour* and Bart Tare in *Gun Crazy*) or the hero in a position of obvious inadequacy in relation to the criminal connivers and to the police, and tries to go back to a position of security. These are the cases of Lt. Sam Lubinsky in *The Killers* or Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt*, for example.

In a period of film history that was heavily censored, *film noir* managed to question the whole concept of masculine adequacy, showing evidence of a crisis in masculinity and offering a way of perhaps restructuring and consolidating male identity. The prototypical malaise in these *noirs* strips these male protagonists of any sense of control over those dark forces afflicting them. The number of traumatised or castrated males in these films cannot be reconciled with the representation of traditional male images, and is clearly evidence of some kind of “crisis of confidence” in masculinity.

1.5 *Dazed and Confused: The Voiceover / Flashback Narration*

Two key stylistic and narrative devices that are constant in *film noir* are the flashback and the voiceover narration. The two techniques are sometimes used more ambiguously than at others depending on the amount of information required for the viewer to follow the diegesis. Although the voiceover / flashback practice was used prior to *noir*'s heyday, with films like *The Power and the Glory* (1933) or *The Judge Priest* (1934), it is during the *noir* cycle that this strategy began to be used insistently.

As the *film noir* canon shows, the voiceover / flashback approach was applied for many different purposes. Most commonly, flashback emerges out of a protagonist's encounter with a scene from the past (an event, a person, an object). The spectator normally knows that a flashback is about to happen when the camera zooms up into the *noir* character's face, showing a pensive look, and then the voiceover narration starts. The viewer, consequently, begins seeing as if staring into the narrator's mind's eye and the narrative builds with significant information from the past and/or sets up the context to make filmicly present events clearer. The protagonist may or (less frequently) may not be seen in the flashback segment, but the whole process is used as a way of entering the narrator's consciousness and memory, and this visibly has a much greater impact than any mere linguistic utterance.

Citizen Kane is a fundamental reference for this strategy, especially for its use of multiple voices and vantage points on the life of its subject, Charles Foster Kane. Orson Welles's approach stresses the relativity of perspective that characterises cinematic seeing, that is, in the film the viewer is often compelled to identify with the protagonist's disturbing sense of dislocation, thus disrupting the normal diegetic path. For instance, when Thatcher gets a white page from his memoir book, the camera focuses very intensely on its whiteness, and an immediate flashback starts, "sending" us back into the hero's joyful years of his childhood. At the same time, through the use of other flashbacks, a series of images are displayed showing a mixture of happy moments of freedom and impressions of desolation, all reconciled by the originating page.

Many other *noir* productions followed this pattern of a variety of voices / narrators and flashbacks. *Double Indemnity*, for example, makes use of two time-frames: the real present and remembered time. While Neff is dictating his confession of having killed a man into a dictaphone, the words elicit a flashback that is sporadically narrated by voiceover confession. There seems to be a certain tension between the speaker's present situation and the scenes he recounts of the past. They seem to emerge from his memory or his consciousness and the images that we view deviate our attention to try to get an explanation and a clear meaning for the past events.

The same happens with *Out of the Past*⁵⁵ or *The Big Clock*, in both of which there is also an unusual juxtaposition of temporalities. Here again the voiceover / flashback strategy is used to highlight the weight of fate in the lives of the characters. As Paul Schrader observes, the flashback technique is used as a way to establish "an irretrievable past, a predetermined fate, and an all-enveloping hopelessness" (in Silver & Ursini 1996:58). This kind of narrative combination, in fact, normally comes associated with the basic *noir* conventions, namely those of a subjective nature (for example, disturbed psychological states). This technique, as seen so far, is often used to display the mental conflicts that exist in the minds of the (amnesiac) *noir* protagonists, in films such as *Possessed*, *The High Wall* (1947) or *Fear in the Night*. In these films, dream sequences are used to express the psychological disturbance that invades the characters' minds. In others, especially Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, the limits are being pushed insofar as the creation of a very specific sense of malaise is concerned. Yet, in all of them, American society is presented to us as ruined by psychological and social trauma, with central protagonists who seem to have emerged from a haunted past and for whom escape, as seen many times, is impossible.⁵⁶

The technique of voiceover used in *Detour* can be even more overwhelming in the sense that the voice of Al Roberts is actually his own mind speaking out, restructuring his journey with Vera. Again, we here find a two-levelled function of the technique: it externalises in the protagonist's memory images and emotions and it internalises his inner voyage by the incessant confessional tone of his narration. His voice unceasingly addresses

⁵⁵ See p. 350: "Modes and Subverted Uses of Flashbacks".

⁵⁶ In this respect, *Kiss Me Deadly* is (arguably) believed to be the film that closes the era of *film noir*. The film also presents a private detective marked by fate who, similarly to the hero in *The Maltese Falcon* (which opened the *noir* period), is also in search for a treasure (a statue or an iron box).

an impersonal “you” giving the viewer the impression that he or she is the person being spoken to. The spectator occupies a rather uncomfortable position as he/she seems to be powerless, and often feels unsympathetic and incredulous. The voice represents his struggle against fate, which seems to be self-defeating, and despite the projection of his sense of pessimism and doom (brought about again by voiceover), the “detour” appears to be the road he wants to travel.

While the novel is told by a third-person in exacting chronological order, the film *Mildred Pierce* uses voiceover narration (the voice of Mildred). Although Monte Beragon’s (Zachary Scott) killing does not even take place in the original novel, the narrative is framed by the the police inquiring Mildred. The killing becomes thus the focal point of the film, and through Mildred’s voiceover, a flashback retells the entire movie until the moment of Beragon’s death and each flashback is arranged so that this act of violence informs and dominates it.

In addition to the images, the voiceover commentary of Johnny Farrell (Glenn Ford) and the diegetically rooted commentaries of Uncle Pio (Steven Geray) and the detective constitute another important source of knowledge for the development of the story in *Gilda*. Semiotically speaking, the image is the support of knowledge in the classical Hollywood text, and ultimately it acts as the guarantor of reality and affect in the film. No matter how badly each character behaves, whether lying or not, like Johnny Farrell in his blind devotion to Ballin Mundson (George Macready), the image does not lie, but in *Gilda* that image may appear to be self-contradictory: the question of sexuality is completely suppressed, either towards men or towards women; and Gilda’s essential “innocence” is only revealed at the end, although hinted out through the ambiguous metonymy of striptease which may be suggestive of unveiling her own “goodness” after all.

One could argue that voiceovers can often reveal far too much about the characters or the story, but indirectly it can serve to undercut the imagery and the dialogue which should be having this function. In *Gilda*, for instance, Johnny’s voiceover creates a certain temporal confusion, as his explanation is prepared in the past tense, but then the voice speaks in the moment of the enunciation just to give the impression that Gilda really is what she appeared to be.

However, it has also to be understood that flashbacks and essentially voiceovers exist in *film noir* as cinematographic techniques that save time for filmmakers, especially

when plots are complex and misleading (a film like *Detour* packs its twists and turns into just over sixty minutes). At a straightforward level, most of these screenplays were adapted from novels or pulp fiction sources, and so there seems to be no better way than to use these strategies to capture and maintain the tone of the novel which was written in the first person. Most important of all, they are just like any other “tool” in the art of narrative filmmaking. In the case of *film noir*, they constitute a means of “telling” as well as “showing” (for censorship purposes). They are such a powerful device for the *noir* narrative that they can provide the spectator with the presence of the facts. As Turim puts it, “the flashback introduces a reversed temporal order that creates the past as the site of the fiction, as a terrain, privileged subjective realm of the imaginary” (Turim 1989:170). Therefore, flashbacks function as a way for the *noir* protagonists to retell their story, making a confession of their motivations, their acts, and through these confessional flashbacks, seeking expiation or simply a way of gathering sympathy and understanding. Told in a confessional flashback by the dying insurance agent, *Double Indemnity*, coming at the beginning of the cycle, helped establish the flashback and first-person narration as the calling-card of *film noir*, and here again, the technique used helps create a tense counterpoint between the confession itself and the present situation of the confessor.

Rendered as retrospective narratives, flashbacks can be regarded as weakening the reliability of the narrator, or the apparent objectivity of the images. They try to make sense of a past that is described as odd and hostile and often unfinished. Some films like *Sunset Boulevard* or *D.O.A.* use the flashback narrative of a man already dead. In both of these unusual cases, the male protagonist is haunted by past events which still control them, as opposed to having some power over the retelling of the story - and yet there still seems to be no way back for the characters to change the whole situation.

In other cases too, the flashback / voiceover technique used in these films can also be described as a reflection of psychoanalytical models. As a response to postwar trauma, the flashback helps the viewer to understand the pervading sense of paranoia and the hallucinations that veterans experienced upon returning from war. The voice plays a major role in psychoanalysis, as a vehicle to unlock an unstable mental state, and many *noir* films that integrate these narrative techniques in their plots, obsessed with the psyche, portray the widespread popular Freudianism of that time. For example, in films such as *Cornered* (1945) or *Dead Reckoning*, Dick Powell and Humphrey Bogart respectively play the roles

of war veterans who, unfolding their stories in flashback, show signs of mental instability and of still suffering from war trauma.

In the case of female *noir* protagonists, flashbacks / voiceovers are also deployed quite extensively to emphasise the hysteria and other psychological disorders of women. John Braham's *The Locket* (1946) is a melodrama about a woman who tells her story in a series of flashbacks (within flashbacks) from various angles. The bride-to-be Nancy Patton (Laraine Day) starts telling her psychological drama as a child when she was wrongly accused of theft. Her kleptomania has caused her to become a very unhappy adult and ultimately a murderess. Curtis Bernhard's *Possessed* depicts the amnesia of Louise Howell (Joan Crawford), an emotionally unbalanced woman who is coaxed into unfolding her life when she is sent to the hospital. Anatole Litvak's *Sorry, Wrong Number* portrays paranoid invalid Leona Stevenson (Barbara Stanwyck), who is trapped with only the telephone as her sole link with the outside world. The film is played out in phone conversations (separating inside and outside) and many flashbacks that disturb chronology.⁵⁷ The voice in all these films is the mechanism for psychoanalysis, as it represents the psyche, transporting the protagonists into visions of a past dominated by symbols and objects that represent thoughts and memories. About this polyphony of voices and interruptions, J. P. Telotte states that:

(...) in multiplying narrators and viewpoints, a film like *Sorry, Wrong Number* (...) unleashes a nightmare of potential that always haunts the *noir* world - the potential of ambiguity, of multiple, indeterminate meanings, and of a self that is subject to unseen, unsensed forces. (Telotte 1989:86)

In conclusion, voiceover / flashbacks, more than in any other film form, were used in *film noir* in very imaginative ways. First, the phenomenon of the flashback is essential in the exploration of *film noir* especially in the relationship of the individual towards society (hence the confessional tone of flashbacks in *Double indemnity*, for example). As they provoke the distortion of time and space, these narrative devices can place the protagonist in another temporal dimension in cinematographic terms, undermining the apparent objectivity of the images. At the same time, through nightmares and hallucinatory

⁵⁷ The influence of the Gothic romance is particularly evident in the film through the combination of flashbacks within flashbacks and the fracturing of information that has an impact on time order. As seen before, the Gothic romance films expressed paranoia and questioned subjectivity by splitting up and destabilising the narrative structure.

flashbacks, the *noir* characters reveal themselves to be trapped into believing they are guilty of murder or unaware of their innocence. Their pursuit of self-identity, seeking answers and an elusive truth in the past, often stimulates this disorienting perspective of the unknown, as Turim points out:

This use of flashbacks to fill the character psychology and of close-ups on objects symbolically saturated with psychological meanings can be seen as establishing both the iconography and the narrative structure from which the psychological melodrama will develop. (Turim 1989:148)

From the spectator's point of view, these devices serve the stories and most of them work beautifully to create a bond between a certain character and the audience. Ultimately, as a vehicle of inquiry, flashbacks explain how one finds oneself in this moment in the story, and manage thus to place the audience in the same morally complex positions from which *noir* protagonists operate, as with Al Roberts in *Detour* or Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*. Therefore, the viewer becomes ethically involved with the criminals, hoping that they will elude the ever-cruel present, even if that means identification with a hero who is a selfish and fierce loner.

1.6 *Noir Atmospherics: Cinematography and Iconography*

Film noir's visual style, as I have explained, can be traced back to German Expressionism which emphasised exaggerated, recurrently grotesque, frightening images, and, since many of the directors of *noir* were émigrés from the countries where this movement was invented, they made vital contributions to *film noir*. It is at the level of those visual techniques (sometimes referred to as “realist”: location photography, moving camera, depth of field) that this cycle of films has to be perceived and accounted for. This characteristic visual style is thus consistent both with the *noir* diegesis and the naturalism of exterior and interior locales but, most importantly, in the relationship of setting to mental states. The “realism” of a montage is often depicted through a cinematic aesthetic that incorporates these visual tropes and helps to create the *noir* mood. Therefore, it is possible to see that Paul Schrader is right when he maintains that:

Because film noir was first of all a style, because it worked out its conflict visually rather thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, it was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems. (Schrader 1972:9)

The visual look found in *noir* productions needs to be understood as a way creative personnel had to engineer the theme of a film. The stylistics of these movies was indeed inherent to the styles of their directors, who found a pattern of generic development rising from theme, but also from technique, through the use of voiceover, flashbacks, expressionistic lighting and set designs, and low and high-angle camerawork, as seen earlier. Finally, some of the finest black-and-white cinematography of the American screen was also to be found in the work of cinematographers and responsible for the authorship of that style. Among the many who contributed to the *noir* movement were Woody Bredell (*Phantom Lady*, *Christmas Holiday*, *The Killers*), Franz Planer (*The Chase*, *Criss Cross*, *99 River Street*), Nicholas Musuraca (*Stranger on the Third Floor*, *Deadline at Dawn*, *Out of the Past*, *The Hitch-Hiker*, *The Blue Gardenia*), Joseph La Shelle (*Laura*, *Fallen Angel*, *Road House*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *George E. Diskant* (*Desperate*, *They Live by Night*, *On Dangerous Ground*, *Kansas City Confidential*, *The Narrow Margin*), and John Alton (*T-Men*, *Raw Deal*, *Mystery Street*, *The People against O'hara*, *He Walked by Night*, *The*

Big Combo). Although I acknowledge the input of all these cinematographers, I chose here John Alton as the one who had the clearest impact on the evolution of many directors' *noir* oeuvre. Alton was adept in the techniques of "mystery lighting" as one reads in his book *Painting with Light* (1949). "Black and white are colors" (Alton 1995:ix), he claimed, and he also noted the striking effects of the "passing automobile headlights on the ceiling of a dark interior" and "fluctuating neon or other electrical signs", as well as the play of light on "shiny, wet surfaces" (Alton 1995:47-8). For a cinematographer who "could see more in the dark than I could in color", Schrader remarks that,

Perhaps the greatest master of *noir* was Hungarian-born John Alton, an expressionist cinematographer who could relight Times Square at noon if necessary. No cinematographer better adapted the old expressionist techniques to the new desire for realism. (Schrader 1972:10)

A freeze-frame which is most emblematic of this *noir* cinematographer's art comes from the end of the film *The Big Combo*, one that portrays the silhouettes of Susan Lowell (Jean Wallace) and Leonard Diamond (Cornel Wilde) with striking contrasts in the black and white photography (fig. 39), combined with a mastery of visual composition (see also p. 387). Alton reveals here that:

Fog photographs lighter than it looks to the eye. Actors are dressed in dark wardrobe, so that they stand out against the back haze (...) with a remarkable third-dimensional feeling. Fog is particularly suitable for outstanding light effects in the form of shafts of light. (Alton 1995:118)



Figure 39. *The Big Combo*

John Alton's highly stylised photography provides a visual confirmation of the debt *film noir* owed to Expressionism. In the first of several films he made with director Anthony Mann, *T-Men* (1948), Alton managed to establish his reputation. His photography in this film is a primary dramatic force, with its use of deep focus on a diagonal plane, helping the director to express the mutual alienation of the characters. One good example from the film is the scene that takes place in the nightclub in which O'Brien (Dennis O'Keefe) watches Schemer (Wallace Ford); or the scene in the market in which Genaro (Alfred Ryder) and Schemer are reflected in one window and again reflected from another window at a double remove. The depth of these shots with very clear backgrounds and low-key lighting foregrounds allows us to follow the visual narrative of the film, as the sequence of images below show (fig. 40):



Figure 40. Some major scenes from *T-Men*

Low-key lighting, or also known as chiaroscuro lighting, is another important mark of most *noirs* from the classic period. This dramatic use of light and shade consists of an angular alternation of dark shadows and stark fields of light “not only in night exteriors but also in dim interiors shielded from daylight by curtains or Venetian blinds” (Silver 2004b:16). Alain Silver also notes that this lighting technique helps create a dramatic tension all by itself, and serves the purpose of *noir* productions with their stories of recessive motives and psychological imprisonment.

Historically, chiaroscuro can be traced from the street paintings of prominent realist painter Edward Hopper or the grotesque and shocking crime photos of Weegee, an Austrian-born American photographer, whose black-and-white shots documented street life in New York. It also comes from the works of painters like Caravaggio and Rembrandt

(chiaroscuro is often effected in cinema with the use of so-called “Rembrandt lighting”), whose paintings depict subjects in dramatic lighting with pronounced cast shadows. Silver and Ursini emphasise the deliberate relationship that existed between these styles and about the iconic work of Weegee:

The audience which so readily embraced *noir* symbology is much the same as the readers who scanned the tabloids for Weegee’s lurid photos. Just after World War II, long after the age of innocence in America, long after a class system had emerged (...), Weegee’s voyeuristic Speed Graphic celebrated the common man and mocked those who led lives of privilege and wealth. Amidst the postwar ennui, underneath a feeling of alienation and boredom, the anti-traditional images of Weegee and *film noir* both provided a distracting and alternate view of the world. (Silver & Ursini 1999a:44)

Moreover, the chiaroscuro effect is also reminiscent of German Expressionism with its reliance on artificial studio lighting. Critics argue about the possible meanings of chiaroscuro and what it might represent from a historical perspective. My task here is rather to understand this lighting technique from a functional stylistic point of view as it creates a new spatiality and brings a different psychological dimension to film, that chimes in precisely with the affect and mood of *film noir*. Criminal deception and cunning machination are enhanced by the use of this technique. Chiaroscuro develops thus dramatic realism, and it also provides visual interest and thrills. In fact, this technique gives the spectator clues as to the nature of the *noir* protagonists, how they seek redemption, how they try to bring themselves out of the shadows metaphorically, often in the form of a confession, as in the case of Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity*.

Boris Ingster’s *Stranger on the Third Floor* is considered to be the first true *film noir* as it represents a distinct break in style and substance with the preceding mystery and horror films of the thirties and because it also displays the most explicit influence of German Expressionism and chiaroscuro. The scene below (fig. 41) is a good example of that influence and the lighting techniques employed; it also contains some very important symbolic elements. In this particular scene, filmed in chiaroscuro, the staircase, one of the symbols that I will discuss later, divides up the two men engaged in a pursuit and the image of Peter Lorre (he plays “the stranger”) with a white scarf around his neck appears reflected on the stucco wall behind him and carefully contrived lighting casts the banister bars as a sign of his imprisonment.



Figure 41. *Stranger on the Third Floor*

All these lighting techniques, from chiaroscuro to deep-focus and odd angles, constituted the visual look of *noir* and helped to shape many of the other elements of post-war *film noir*. Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* is in my view one of the best *noirs* to employ this meticulous type of iconography to the full. This early film is predominantly relevant for its influential stylistic touches, such as the use of shades of black and white, and is also notable for its realist on-location photography. George Barnes, a skilful photographer of advertising photos, shot New York City's Wall Street in this film with an expressiveness not often seen at the time. The two scenes below depict Joe Morse (John Garfield) carefully framed in escape from the many physical obstacles in his way (fig. 42 left). His fearful look is enhanced by all the vertical lines that fill the image as a clear sign of his entrapment, with the bridge in the background.

The low angle shots from a distance, as seen in fig. 42 right, call the spectator's attention to all the possibilities for defeat of life in this city. This image shows the silhouette of Morse running down a stairway to retrieve the body of a loved one cast on the ocean rocks, a physical prefiguring of his personal preparation for the long descent into a haunting final. The lighting and camerawork in this shot were inspired by the paintings of Edward Hopper who painted wide shots of solitary figures moving through urban scenarios and stark lamplight in nocturnal landscapes. The aesthetic component of this shot is further accentuated by the low angle of the photography fusing expressionism and action.



Figure 42. *Force of Evil*

In the film, Joe Morse is a gambling syndicate lawyer unavoidably tied to a set of ethics that he does not want to fully understand. His fear of failure and his search for easy money allow him to justify his role in “legalising” a large-scale numbers racket. And the final scene depicted below (fig. 43) is also metaphorical as it shows how far down Joe Morse had descended. This brilliant shot shows a truly expressionistic stage, with Morse’s back to the camera and walking under a bridge with its span of steel girders looming over the riverbank. Joe plays out here his personal drama, disproportionately small and oppressed by the dimensions of the bridge, as a manifestation of the power and immensity of forces arranged against him. The scene acquires a theatrical aura, and as Joe walks further away beneath the bridge and amongst the debris of stones, the smaller his image will get, which is entirely appropriate for the way in which Joe has staged his death.

Using *noir* iconography and characterisation in “a near-perfect fugue of visual and aural poetry” (Dickos 2002:73), as Dickos points out, Polonsky was able to cloak his leftist social criticism within the melodramatic framework of gangsterism and corruption. *Force of Evil* was accused of extolling socialism, or even of directly attacking capitalism.⁵⁸ Polonsky was driven out of the movie industry as soon as the film was completed (he was required to appear in court by the HUAC and was blacklisted), accused of deploying leftist

⁵⁸ Initially titled “Number Rackets”, Roberts Production acceded to the demands of the Motion Picture Code Administration not to use any title incorporating the phrase “numbers racket”.

indoctrination in the movie in the midst of the Red Scare. The ending of *Force of Evil*, with the terrible sense of doom hanging over Joe Morse, is a renovation of one's self and one's responsibility in the world. As Polonsky said, "having reached the absolute bottom of commitment, there's nothing left to do but commit yourself. There's no longer a problem of identity when you have no identity left at all. So, in your next step, you must become something" (in Dickos 2004:75).



Figure 43. *Force of Evil*

All these illustrative examples of films support my belief that *film noir* is first and foremost a visual style, a specific aesthetic response to the way we have come to see our human condition, shaped by the world and the movies which reflect it. An interesting point here is that if one considers a random selection of the films released over a period of less than two years, such as *The Big Clock* (Paramount, 1948), *Force of Evil* (MGM, 1948), *Railroaded* (PRC, 1947), *The Naked City* (Universal, 1948), *Crossfire* (RKO, 1947), *Framed* (Columbia, 1947), one might notice that all these films employing different

directors and cinematographers, different screenwriters with their own stories and plots, and casting different stars and using different studios, have a common denominator that binds them together: a unified photographic style. Moreover, style or visual iconography as I prefer to call it when discussing *film noir*, reproduces an image which binds the interior feelings of the protagonists with those of the viewer, enabling the spectator to follow a given dramatic situation and to form his or her own judgement. As Richard Combs writes in his article “Anatomy of a Director” about Otto Preminger:

His aim is to present characters, actions and issues clearly without prejudice. This objectivity is a mark of his respect for his characters and, particularly, for his audience. He presupposes an intelligence active enough to allow the spectator to make connections, comparisons and judgements (...). His films are about ways of reaching decisions – on facts and on courses of action (...). Fluidity (of development, not indecision) distinguishes Preminger’s visual style as it distinguishes his narrative methods and his moral attitude. (*Sight & Sound*, vol.19, April 2009, pp. 38-41)

The type of fluidity in Preminger is indeed achieved through a specific visual style which “allow[s] the spectator to make connections”, as the director mentions, with the necessary “comparisons and judgments”. I would add that the *noir* photographic style requires the appropriate *mise-en-scène* which in these films is designed to disconcert or disturb the spectator in a parallel manner to the disorientation felt by the *noir* heroes in their quest for self-identity. *Film noir*’s stylistic distinctiveness is essentially recognised through the way it transformed the conventions of the crime and private eye dramas into those peculiar to *noir*. Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton understood this back in 1955 when they wrote in their landmark book *Panorama du film noir américain*:

In its most typical works, the *film noir* tried to give rise to a ‘new thrill,’ indivisible and inimitable. It juxtaposed certain themes within the framework of a particular technique: unusual plots, eroticism, violence, psychological ambivalence within criminal parties. It is the convergence of these dramatic particulars, some of which are not new, that created a style. (Borde & Chaumeton 2002:15)

In the heyday of *film noir* these talented men worked within Hollywood’s studio system and only rarely received recognition for their achievements outside professional circles. No one can deny, however, the beauty of some of the finest cinematography in American cinema; in fact, their generic usage of visual stylistics is what identifies *film noir*

in the popular imagination. While the screenwriter and director may conjure up the vision, it is the *noir* cinematographer who brings it to life. In the case of Charles Laughton's *noir* *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), for example, cinematographer Stanley Cortez employs an expressionistic shooting style that concentrated on heavy symbolism and contrast and which acts out the vision of terror and eeriness of the plot (see fig. 92 on p. 330). Menacing lighting and long depth of field along with an array of camera angles all contribute to enhance the particular vision of opposing forces (good and evil) that are present in the film.

Apart from the way that these films were photographed, there are certain images of set pieces and objects that are recurrent in *noir* productions and delivered with such expertise that their visual prominence in the narrative defines their importance in any discussion of the *noir* phenomenon as a style. The recognised settings of lamp-streets in the night-time city just after rainfall or rays of flashing neon signs streaming through the venetian blinds of windows in empty offices are just the most repeated visual patterning that we retain as being common to most *noir* films.

I have discussed some of these elements here; some other symbols will also be dealt with in more detail in Part IV. Until now, I have shown images that are just familiar in *noir* narratives: bridges and stairs, alleyways and deserted docklands, luxurious apartments. In them, we often see impeccably dressed women, with their lipstick and furs, watches and keys, telephones ringing. In almost every single *noir* film telephones of all sorts – “pay phones, office phones, bedside phones, restaurant and nightclub phones that are brought to one's table” – are symbolic objects that “are often connected in the films to questions of privacy and secrets; they are emblematic of the *mystique* of communication in a world which is clamorous with sound and at the same time, at its deepest level, eerily silent” (Christopher 1997:92). In Litvak's *Sorry, Wrong Number*, the telephone is used as a vital device with which Leona (Barbara Stanwyck) is able to remain in control and to connect with the outside world.

We also see the bent-brimmed hats of men with their trench coats, and indisputably the scenes enveloped by cigarettes smoked in abundance everywhere. Indeed everybody is always smoking in *film noir*; the films are constantly enshrouded in smoke – in *The Shanghai Gesture*, for example, Poppy's descent into corruption is revealed by her slovenly pose, as she sits over a bar top with a cigarette dangling from her mouth; or in *Out of the Past*, in which Jeff Markham and Whit Sterling smoke angrily at each other. At one

point, Jeff enters a room, Sterling extends a pack and says: "Cigarette?" to which Jeff, holding up his hand, replies, "Smoking".

Finally, the American city, as I mentioned previously, is the ultimate symbol of *film noir* as it comprises all of the above iconographic elements - the paraphernalia of night-time. Of these, the extravagant night bars, the jazz clubs, are just as essential for *noir* iconography and they are going to be analysed next.

1.7 *Sounds of the City: Jazz Soundtracks*

Associated with the Weimar culture which pioneered the connections between Expressionism and jazz, this type of music was predominant in *film noir* due to its improvisational features and the fact that since the early twenties it has been linked with the crime and dissipation found in most gangster-owned clubs of that time.⁵⁹ This combination of jazz with an expressionistic décor can indeed be traced in the early Hollywood musicals almost from their very beginning (*Broadway*, 1929; *King of Jazz*, 1930), especially at Universal where this “Germanic” influence was most distinct. A strongly rhythmic music of black American origin that emphasises interpretation rather than composition, jazz is often connected with the notion of improvisation with, as Robert Porfirio states, “affective qualities quite compatible with the expressionistic quest for deeper meanings that focussed upon heightened states and the unconscious in order to probe the secrets of the soul” (in Butler 2002:67).

One of the most striking qualities of early jazz was its vocalised tone. Musicians sought to make each instrument sing like a human voice, though it especially favoured syncopation, displacement of the regular meter by stressing a normally weak beat. With its origins in the black American demimonde, jazz is often connected with speakeasies, and by association, with sex, violence and death. Hollywood soon took advantage of these associations, emphasising the strident and aggressive aspects of the music over its warmer and sentimental side and this prominence contributed to those popular jazz scores of the mid-forties and fifties that gave aural significance to contemporary urban issues. The tribulations of the jazz man’s life were gradually transposed to *film noir* as both forms were preoccupied with telling tales of anxiety and disorientation or breakdown, which flourished in America during the thirties and the postwar period. But it was *Among the Living*, a film released in autumn of 1941, about the same time as *The Maltese Falcon*, that used the

⁵⁹ Curiously, the gangster film did not make much use of jazz, and it remained for the next generation, and particularly for the *noir* cycle, to promote that special relationship between jazz and urban violence.

music's dissonant potential to stage a jazz sequence in a bar to accompany the shots of Paul Raden (Albert Dekker) killing the girl in the alley.

This association of jazz with disturbed mental states was made even clearer later in George Marshall's *The Blue Dahlia*, with its inclusion of amnesia, helplessness, and disillusionment to create the *noir* mood and the sensibility of the film. In the original screenplay by Raymond Chandler, the writer asked for Buzz (William Bendix) to be the real killer, blinded and completely nonreactive to the violent effects of the war.⁶⁰ Whenever he hears jazz music, amnesiac Buzz refers to it as "jungle music", "the sexually liberating beat of postwar prosperity". Appropriately, it was the works directed by Robert Siodmak that established the triad of jazz, violence and sexuality within the cycle, most memorably in certain expressionistic interludes in *The Phantom Lady*, *The Killers* and *Criss Cross*. Interestingly enough too, the type of jazz played in the *noirs* of the forties is quite different from the type played in *noirs* from the fifties (mirroring the differences in the films themselves, as discussed earlier). In a show of aesthetic synergy, the kind of jazz played in films like *Phantom Lady* or *The Killers* is much more strident in keeping with the mental states of the characters and the urban violence they live amongst.

The jazz club in Maté's *D.O.A.* is a perilous and uninhibited place; it is ultimately where the protagonist's murder takes place, and so the music played there is more aggressive but it fits perfectly with the hero's fury and act of vengeance. While on a short break in San Francisco, Frank Bigelow (Edmond O'Brien), a certified public accountant, visits a sleazy jazz nightclub, "The Fisherman Club", where a mysterious man with a striped scarf (fig. 44) poisons his drink. The next day Frank is informed by his doctor that his body has absorbed "luminous toxin", an irreversible iridium poisoning. Given only a few days to live, the doctor shows him a glowing glass tube of luminescent poison and ominously tells him: "You've been murdered!" The basic atmosphere in *D.O.A.* is drastically inverted during this scene in the nightclub. Even the music played suddenly switches to that of a small combo jazz, with no lyrics, in anticipation of what is about to happen to the main protagonist. The mundane tone of the earlier part of the flashback abruptly assumes the macabre tenor of what is about to follow. The powerful use of jazz music, interpreted with tight close-ups of sweating musicians caught up in the fury of their

⁶⁰ The ambience of Chandler's hard-boiled novels aroused objections to this film from both Paramount and the Navy as they considered the novel's ending to be an insult to the gallant men who had won the war. This forced Chandler to rewrite the film implicating Dad as the murderer.

music, combines with images of patrons lost in the hammering jazz rhythms as the scene rises to reach its climax. The sequence at this waterfront jazz joint, where a black quintet plays wild bebop, draws on an accurate *mise-en-scène* with figures spinning just as wildly as the music itself, with striking close-ups of the musician's faces. They all seem to provide a background context for an ever-darkening nightmare transforming Bigelow from an ordinary man into a victim and soon an obsessed retaliator in his quest to find out the motive for his imminent death. Finally, Dimitri Tiomkin's music exemplifies Frank's state of mind and mirrors his tragedy, at once an expressionistic vision of Bigelow's plight and a diegetic evocation of its informal topos. Integral to *D.O.A.*'s structure, the jazz club is the major locus for a network of metaphoric associations, namely those related to jazz, sex and death.



Figure 44. *D.O.A.*

One of the most distinctive features of *film noir* is its construction of gender. By using central archetypes that differed from classical Hollywood productions (the heroic male and supportive females), *film noir* added much more complexity to its range of characters and its construction of gender hinted at processes of social change out of control. Jazz clubs were part of that coarse but beguiling underworld where people would come to

discover their susceptibilities to vice and temptation. *Out of the Past* traces the course of these fundamentally different visions of gender relationships and simultaneously references the uncertainty of dealing with race, as Jan B. Wager notes:

(...) the film's [*Out of the Past*] ambiguous treatment of race serves as a model. (...) the male protagonists in classic *film noir* often exhibit a familiarity with black culture that lends them an additional air of hipness. (Wager 2005:57)

This is clearly noticeable when Jeff (Robert Mitchum) goes to a black jazz club to investigate Kathie Moffett (Jane Greer) for Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas). Jeff gets introduced to Kathie's former maid, Eunice (Theresa Harris), and her companion (Caleb Peterson), through a black man who introduces Jeff as a friend of his (fig. 45). The whole scene is played out with no stand-offishness or any type of condescension, but it does offer a casual comment on racial segregation. The setting of the black jazz club is clearly suggestive of the notion of jazz as being the music that was promoted by black bands in the early decades of its development. This passage is thus a good example of the kind of investment that jazz made in the twenties and thirties involving the white community in black culture: "The entrance of the white man into jazz at this level of sincerity and emotional legitimacy did at least bring him, by implication, much closer to the Negro" (in Gabbard 2004:31).

As with several other scenes from *noirs*, white culture seems to keep its distance and shows a lack of interest in the political and racial issues which the locale and music might be thought to raise. In the majority of *noirs* from the forties black characters did not have significant roles, and in most films only appeared as secondary figures, as in the case of the black man who carries Walter Neff's bags or washes his car in *Double Indemnity*. In this particular scene, Jeff is the only white person on the stage and the black patrons of the club seem to ignore him until when he takes a seat at Eunice's table. It would be fair to say therefore that *film noir* is largely concerned with the malaises of the urban white male (black men perhaps had more concrete hurdles to overcome). In many other *noirs*, the white protagonists – either male or female – work in nightclubs as singers, as is the case of Ellen Graham (Veronica Lake) in *This Gun for Hire*, or as dancers, with Gilda (Rita Hayworth) in *Gilda* and musicians or composers, as for example Martin Blair (Dan Duryea) in *Black Angel* or Lily (Ida Lupino) sitting at the piano in *Road House* (1948).



Figure 45. *Out of the Past*

Non-diegetic jazz soundtracks in *noirs* were also particularly distinctive, such as in Siodmak's *Criss Cross* with the frenetic chords of Miklós Rózsa's⁶¹ score yielding to the dance music from within the club, or Max Steiner's score for *Mildred Pierce*. Many musicians and critics think that it is possible to talk of "jazz *noir*". Commercially speaking, people identify Hollywood *film noir* jazz with the "Cool Jazz" period (essentially from the fifties onwards) from the West Coast, and with names such as Miles Davis (1926-1991), Gil Evans (1912-1988) or Gerry Mulligan (1927-1996).

Robert Siodmak's *Phantom Lady*, a film based on one of the "pulpiest" novels of Cornell Woolrich and which is said to have raised the Hollywood profile of Siodmak, also has for its main locus a jazz nightclub. This is where Scott Henderson (Alan Curtis), a

⁶¹ Miklós Rózsa was a Hungarian composer and was regarded by many as one of the "founding fathers of film music". In the twenties, he embarked on a career as a serious classical composer and in the forties moved to California. Still today, Rózsa is viewed as having virtually invented much of the musical language of *film noir*.

successful young civil engineer, went on the night he was arrested and accused of having strangled his wife with his own necktie. On that night, he explains, he went out to this bar, and picked up a woman and persuaded her to join him in going to a musical show. Part of their arrangement was that they would not reveal their names to each other (she thus becomes the phantom lady of the film), so all he knows about her is that she was wearing a flamboyant hat which was identical to the one that the lead Latin American singer in the show was wearing. Henderson is then convicted and sentenced to die in eighteen days. It is up to his devoted secretary, Carol “Kansas” Richman (Ella Raines), who strongly believes in his innocence, to initiate an investigation of her own.



Figure 46. *Phantom Lady*



Figure 47. *Phantom Lady*

Phantom Lady suggests an awkward version of the type of urban spaces found in the Weimar street film (see p. 103), both claustrophobic (a city with hot sizzling streets, with details of threatening shadows) and seductively decadent, with jazz emanating from low-class bars, and the click of high heels on the pavement. The jazz nightclub represents a place exploiting the popular association of jazz with death, drugs, and sex, while jazz’s own improvisational qualities could be conceived in terms of the Freudian “unconscious”. The two shots above (figs. 46 and 47) show Cliff March (Elisha Cook, Jr.) and “Kansas” in a jazz cellar scene, and the whole scene moves so quickly that it almost spins off into the

realm of near-explicit sexual metaphor. This is a famous sequence with Elisha Cook, Jr. playing the jazz drummer, wherein Ella Raines is all dolled-up and disguises herself as a prostitute to track down and seduce Cliff in order to get the information she and her employer need about the “phantom lady”. In the next couple of angles below (fig. 48), director Siodmak gives maximum power to his expressionistic *mise- en-scène* in one of the most striking scenes of *film noir*. The scene is concluded in a drum solo by March that blends sex and music into a visual paradigm of tension (“the drummer’s masturbatory playing”) and release (intercutting shots of sweat and rhythm as he struggles at the drum kit suggesting an orgasmic ending).



Figure 48. *Phantom Lady*

The little music that the film uses is mostly diegetic. It was the intention of the director deliberately not to employ music, which then causes an even greater impact vis-à-vis the spectator when we do hear it and are invited to understand the story through its implications and characters’ moods. It is believed that the fact that half of *Phantom Lady* was devoid of sound effects, essentially Siodmak’s sparing and eccentric approach to sound and music, contributed greatly to the film’s overall success. In the novel, Woolrich describes the setting of the music as “hellish” and he establishes the jam session as a “sort of Dantesque Inferno”. He uses this episode to capture the dangerous eroticism of both drugs and jazz in his own distinctively tense prose style:

The next two hours were sort of a Dantesque Inferno. She knew as soon as it was over she wouldn’t believe it has actually been real at all (...). It was the

phantasmagoria of their shadows, looming back, wavering ceiling-high on the walls. It was the actuality of their faces, possessed, demonic, peering out here and there on sudden notes, then seeming to recede again. It was the gin and marihuana cigarettes, filling the air with haze and flux. It was the wildness that got into them, that at times made her cower into a far corner (...). (Woolrich 2001:27)

The jazz sequences invariably represent a break in the temporal order, and Siodmak makes use of this eliminating diegetic dialogue throughout the whole sequence (for about three minutes) so that jazz benefits from a greater degree of concentration. Shocked upon first entering the downstairs jazz cellar and seeing the quintet of musicians in the throes of a full-blooded jazz session, “Kansas” knows she has to act the “loose woman”. When she looks at herself in the mirror to apply some lipstick, the mirror scene initiates the most dramatic and overtly sexual part of the whole film. Needless to say, the entire sequence was perceived as potentially salacious and some specific warnings were given by Joseph Breen (the then director of the PCA - see p. 138) regarding the sexual nature of the dialogues, the amount of drinking mentioned in the script and the jazz scene itself.

The libidinous nature of the jazz is barely veiled in metaphor in *Phantom Lady*. The type of jazz performed on the *noir* screen was normally linked with the diegesis and tends to draw attention to the role of the *femmes fatales* in these glamorous nightclubs. They certainly offered charged and up-tempo scenes which served the purpose of reinforcing the sexiness and enchantment of these female characters, such as Rita Hayworth (in *Gilda*) or smoky-voiced Lizabeth Scott, who plays the role of a larcenous lady in *Two of a Kind* (1951). These examples show the rhythmic qualities of jazz and the stress given to the beat or pulse of the bass and drums barely sublimates what many connotations found jazz to be representative of - primitivism and sexuality. This is Maxim Gorky’s racist evocation of the animalistic imagery of the “music of the degenerate”:

This insulting chaos of insanity pulses to a throbbing rhythm. Listening for a few minutes to these wails, one involuntarily imagines an orchestra of sexually driven madmen conducted by a man-stallion brandishing a huge genital member. The monstrous bass belches out English words; a wild horn wails piercingly, calling to mind the cries of a raving camel; a drum pounds monotonously; a nasty little pipe tears at one’s ears; a saxophone emits its quacking nasal sound. Fleishy hips sway, and thousands of heavy feet tread and shuffle. (Butler 2002:33)

Since the early styles of jazz, the perceived association of jazz with sex has continued beyond *film noir*. Michael Bywater also confirms the parallels that exist between

the two, affirming that “Jazz is the music of sex: subtle, ardent, the drumbeat marking the boundaries of a space in which the instruments and voices slide, coil and intertwine: question and answer, solo and chorus, advance and retreat” (in Butler 2002:34). As we have seen, the other type of jazz played in movies like *D.O.A.* is normally integrated within the overall narrative of the film. In such cases, the music is played by bands in seedy nightclubs and bars and the tunes tend to be much gloomier and slower, in a more pounding and disorienting style, totally fitting the mood and context of the film. Even soundtracks which were more orchestral in nature make use of jazz instruments, as is the case of the slow howling saxophone over a Robert Mitchum voiceover in *Out of the Past*.

In conclusion, *noir* movies would certainly lose a lot without the contribution of jazz soundtracks. Most importantly for these films the improvisations of jazz may have served to clarify issues of cultural and social, and even sexual identity. Moreover, jazz and the representation of lurid nightclubs of *D.O.A.* or *The Killers*, for example, are deemed to be entirely appropriate locations for their doomed protagonists. The understanding of American jazz in the period 1920 to 1950 conforms to some extent to the racially separate cultural norms of the time. Thus, jazz was marked as dangerous and animalistic, a voice of the menacing but alluring city.

1.8 “Just the facts, Ma’am”: Noir Documentary Style

Towards the end of the forties, the studios began to move out and shoot on location and the expressionist style began to be more and more displaced by a documentary-style realism. When still facing budget-cuts and restrictions on sets, directors shot on location as a way to relieve pressure on studios and consequently provide them with more independence in the use of their camerawork. These developments resulted in the semi-documentary, a story shot on location and often in a more self-reflexive manner, drawing attention to the way the films were shot. I should also point out that these *noir* semi-documentaries tend to privilege the disruptions of a well-functioning social system over psycho-sexual issues from earlier *noirs* (the first phases of *film noir*, also referred to as “Studio Expressionism” which roughly – but certainly not strictly - ranged from 1944 to 1947).

Producer Louis de Rochemont’s *The House on 92nd Street*, directed by Henry Hathaway, is considered to be one of the first films shot on location (alternating between Washington and New York). The film gained even more “documentary authenticity” as many of the actors were not professionals (some were F.B.I. personnel playing themselves) and it employed actual F.B.I. footage of photographed surveillance. The story is concerned with F.B.I. agents infiltrating and destroying a cell of “fifth-columnist” agents. The film opens with the national anthem and it is, we are told, the reconstruction of the actual case thereby giving apparent authenticity to the whole story.⁶² Despite using an appropriate warning voiceover (from a bombastic narrator), the film lacks the subjective perspective usually present in *film noir*, and thus it might be considered too patriotic for *noir*.

Although the semi-documentary was developed by Twentieth Century-Fox, all the major studios followed suit and produced similar films including Universal’s *The Naked*

⁶² The film opens with typed credits: “(...) photographed in the localities of the incident depicted (...). Wherever possible in the actual places the original incidents occurred, using FBI employees, except for the principal players.” The same happens with *The Street with No Name* (1948) with its extensive location filming and minor parts played by actual F.B.I. personnel: “The motion picture you are about to see was adapted from the files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Wherever possible it was photographed in the original locale and played by the actual F.B.I. personnel.”

City, Paramount's *Union Station* and Columbia's *711 Ocean Drive* (1950). All of these newsreel-style films present the main characteristics of the *noir* semi-documentary and became standard in this new cycle of films: the stress that was put upon actuality and investigative procedures, the use of location photography, and a stentorian narrator. Most of the films starred a government institution and used a government agent that goes undercover to report the activities of the malefactors (in the case of *The House on 92nd Street*, Bill Dietrich (William Eythe) is asked to become an undercover agent and account for the activities of German spies and infiltrators).

Evoking the outdoor shooting adopted in much of interwar French cinema, the *noir* semi-documentary constituted a socially affirmative alternative to the *noir*'s psychological and individual emphasis found in the early American *noirs* of the forties, featuring stable organisational heroes such as James Stewart's crusading Chicago reporter in *Call Northside 777* (1948) and Barry Fitzgerald's veteran Manhattan cop in *The Naked City*. These two films have on-location camerawork and brought to light the problems of institutional forces, the social injustices and the bureaucratic intransigence of the legal authorities. In fact, these "police procedural" films can also be seen as an attempt to appropriate some of *noir*'s louche glamour for the forces of order. Both protagonists (James Stewart in the role of newspaper reporter McNeal, and Barry Sullivan as Inspector Donnelly) sense the corruptive influence of police work which is mechanical and rule-bound, and their solution is to be as detached and objective as possible to crack their cases and ultimately to defeat a corrupt political machine. The scene below (fig. 49) shows McNeal and Lt Kelly in the Police Department office trying to investigate the case of Frank Wiecek (Richard Conte), who has been sentenced to life imprisonment for killing a police officer during a grocery store robbery. With his hat on, McNeal is just finishing a phone call and making his way out into the streets of Chicago to slowly gather the pieces of evidence which will absolve Wiecek.

Call Northside 777 is an important reference for this phase of *film noir* as it was the first film to be shot in a semi-documentary style. Yet, the film (based on a true story) is simultaneously an investigation of the hard-boiled world of a big city daily newspaper, with a reporter for whom the story is what really matters. Along the way, it is the corrupt Chicago legal system, the hearing board, and the police that are scrutinised as they all seem not to be interested in Wiecek's case. The whole film becomes then McNeal's personal

quest as if the story were the mirroring of his own conscience. As it turns out, McNeal does not have to call anyone (the title of the movie actually refers to a phone number that appears in a newspaper ad), and he perseveringly manages to work against the resistance of forces of justice and to free Frank Wiecek who was wrongly convicted eleven years before.



Figure 49. *Call Northside 777*

In these semi-documentary *noirs*, the narrative structure follows the same pattern of that of the private eye whodunits discussed earlier: an outside investigator penetrates a maze of complex relationships to solve a certain mystery. Foster Hirsch provides a good description of these new professional “hunters” in documentary *noirs*:

The investigation framework has a greater impact when the quester is personally involved in the case. The private eye, after all, is a hired professional, an outsider. Like the archetypal western hero, he does what he has to do, and solving the case is his badge of honor. He may use devious methods, he may well resort to violence, but he is not a criminal. He keeps his distance from the underworld, and from his own underworld as well. He is a detached, essentially disinterested figure, and his fundamentally objective view of crime is engrained in the more or less detached style that is the mark of the private eye story. (Hirsch 1981:170)

In my analysis of *The Big Combo* in Part IV, I will return to the theme of the *noir* investigator. One should note here, however, that there is an important departure from what Hirsch states above: while the manhunt theme persists in the second phase of *film noir* with its series of semi-documentaries, especially with detectives or police investigators solving cases as their “badge of honor” and therefore being only related to the crimes through their own jobs, the *noir* private eye series establish a more personal or obsessive reason for crime investigation, involving issues of moral compromise and psychological complexity. Thus, in *noirs* such as *Cornered*, *Phantom Lady*, *The Big Clock* or *Deadline at Dawn* we are introduced to manhunts carried out by investigators spurred on by largely personal motives.

The Naked City remains another brilliant example of Hollywood’s assimilation of documentary style filmmaking. The film opens with a magnificent aerial shot of Manhattan’s skyline and an extraordinary voiceover: “Ladies and gentlemen, the motion picture you are about to see is called *The Naked City*. My name is Mark Hellinger; I was in charge of its production. And I may as well tell you frankly that it’s a bit different from most films you’ve ever seen...” It also makes use of a screenplay based on a range of NYPD’s unsolved cases and police investigations which are encumbered by the intransigence of legal authorities. In this case, the story follows the unexplained murder of a beautiful young woman, ex-fashion model Jean Dexter, which is going to be followed up on by veteran detective Lt. Dan Muldoon (Barry Fitzgerald) and his enthusiastic (but callow) assistant Jimmy Halloran (Don Taylor). The two detectives eventually narrow their search down to two suspects: one, Frank Niles (Howard Duff), who is easily handcuffed by the police, and the other, Willie Garzah (Ted De Corsia), who panics and takes off on a frantic race for freedom through the slums and tenement section of New York City (see fig. 50). Ultimately, the real star of the film becomes the city, with its pulsating street life, and this urban angst is best expressed in the embittered words of Jean’s pale and exhausted father, Mr Batory (Grover Burgess): “We’ll go home, we don’t like this place, this *fine* city”.

Unlike most of Dassin’s other *noir* productions, such as *Brute Force*, *Thieves’ Highway* and *Night and the City*, *The Naked City* almost exclusively deals with black and white absolute truths. Crime itself might not be the most interesting part of the film, but the whole style and its complex voiceover narration make it stand out from other detective

stories. And in order to remind the spectator that the feature was not filmed in a studio but has engaged with the nitty-gritty of urban life, the narrator concludes with: “There are eight million stories in *The Naked City*. This has been one of them”. This closing narration was celebrated in the famous television series of the same name from 1958-63 on the ABC television network. Every episode closed with the same lines by the narrator.



Figure 50. *The Naked City*

While up to the early fifties *film noir* and semi-documentary had developed in an almost autonomous manner, they came to be parallel modes in the fifties crime film. However, the two modes represent two diverse parts of Hollywood’s realist aesthetic, as Borde and Chaumeton have remarked:

The American police-procedural documentary is in reality a documentary glorifying the police (...). There is nothing of this kind in *noir* films. If there are policemen, they are rotten – as the inspector in *The Asphalt Jungle*, or that prime example of a corrupted brute incarnate by Lloyd Nolan in *The Lady in the Lake* – sometimes even murderers (*Fallen Angel* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* directed by Otto Preminger). (Borde & Chaumeton 2002:77)

While the social and spiritual malaise of *film noir* was integrated differently into these police thrillers, these *noir* semi-documentaries also changed significantly during the fifties, especially in terms of the characters and their moral depth and complexity.

Consequently, in the fifties, we start to see the way that organised professional criminals manage to battle and overcome the police forces. In turn, the authorities are often embodied by corrupt and rotten agents, as in *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *On Dangerous Ground*, and Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*, as the quotation above suggests. Although the narrative structure of these semi-documentaries tends to be different from most *noirs*, they remain *noir* in their opposition to the faceless efficiency of the law officers and they demonstrate their exposure of corruption at a high social level. These films, especially *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, are *noir* as they detail the exploits of not so powerful heroes involved in a deeply corrupted society.

Alfred Welker and Anthony Mann's (Mann is uncredited on this film) *He Walked by Night* (1948) is of particular interest to explain the combination of both the conventions of the semi-documentary / police procedural and the more expressionistic tendencies of the tough / psychological *noir* thriller. The film uses real-life actions (the first scene of fig. 51 shows Officer Hollis, in the role of a patrolman on his way home from work, who has been shot and mortally wounded and is lying against his car), together with other semi-documentary realist strategies, such as the detailing of codified police work and the authoritarian voiceover. The story concerns Ray Morgan (Richard Basehart), an undetermined electronics expert who has become a psychopathic loner. Morgan is a troubled, powerful individual who sets himself in opposition to the forces of social law by manoeuvring for his own ends using the same technological skills which the police rely upon. The scenes below (fig. 51) featuring Morgan (second column) stand in contrast to the bland compositions and fully realist lighting which characterise the sequences devoted to police activity. Morgan's psychotic disturbance is particularly enhanced by the emphatically *noir* chiaroscuro lighting, compositional imbalance and low-angled camera set-ups. The last scene depicts Morgan in an impressive chase, seeking refuge in Los Angeles's cavernous network of storm drains. John Alton's extensive back lighting and rich deep blacks make the tunnels both creepy and strangely futuristic, suggesting that Morgan is a creature from another world and anticipating the "alien" antagonists of early fifties cinema. The *mise-en-scène* of the police scene, however, with the police officer looking at his watch, signifies stability, order, the rigid control of individualistic impulses.



Figure 51. Scenes from *He Walked by Night*

In conclusion, although critics affirm that semi-documentary films are not an integral part of the *noir* cycle (Jon Tuska goes so far as to claim that “most of these pseudo-documentaries, in terms of their narrative structure, are the very antithesis of *film noir*” [Tuska 1984:192]), it is fair to recognise that the documentary style influenced the late forties and early fifties productions, a style which was gradually included into *noir* narratives. In the space of a mere three years, from 1948 to 1951, an inspiring incorporation of on-location and documentary footage were introduced in *noir* films such as the ones described above. Many others followed suit: Polonsky’s *Force of Evil*, Mann’s *Side Street*, Kazan’s *Panic in the Streets*, Barry’s *He Ran All the Way*, to cite just some. In all of them, Krutnik argues, “the machinery of official detection – where the individual and the libido tend to be wrapped-in, and penned-in by, the rules – can be directly counterposed, for example, to the individualism and intuitive action of the private eye” (Krutnik 1991:207). Again, one should not ignore either, as Nicholas Christopher put it, that “the theme of the wanderer, the loner, the nightbird, the urban American isolated with and by his machines as a member (or piece) of an ever-fragmenting society, is very much a *noir* theme” (Christopher 1997:91). The disquietude of *film noir*, however, has usually been of another, more inflexible and less comforting, reality.

2 *Noir* and the Film *Auteur*

2.1 *Auteurism*

It was during the fifties that the *auteur* theory gained a hold, especially within French New Wave cinema and with the film critics who were directly attached to the influential journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. At that time, the conviction arose that American commercial cinema deserved to be studied in-depth, or that the idea that masterpieces were just directed by a reduced number of filmmakers was wrong; rather, a large group of directors had had their work unduly rejected and/or ignored. François Truffaut is normally referred to as the cineaste that had a major impact on film criticism in general and the *auteur* theory in particular. However, this theory goes back to the time when André Bazin - one of the members that founded the renowned film periodical - recognised moviemaking as an industrial process in which the director could nevertheless still make his own personal mark in terms of *mise-en-scène*, aesthetic vision, technique, etc. It is therefore the director who basically controls the distinctive features that allow the artistic statement to emerge and be recognisable as such. In this sense, it is acknowledged that Hitchcock, the master of mystery and suspense, derived many of his effects and the psychology which he uses in his film techniques from German Expressionist filmmakers, for example.

Back in January 1954, François Truffaut wrote an essay for *Cahiers du Cinéma* entitled “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français” (“A certain trend in French cinema”), and further analysed the concept of *auteur* by coining the expression “La politique des Auteurs”. This involved a conscious programme to re-examine films and recover what they might have of value. In this regard, Truffaut once defended Jacques Becker’s *Ali Baba et les Quarantes Voleurs* despite the harsh critique by the press when the film was first released:

À la première vision, *Ali Baba* m’a déçu; à la seconde, ennuyé; à la troisième, passionné et ravi. Sans doute le reverrai-je encore mais je sais bien que passé

victorieusement le cap périlleux du chiffre trois, tout film prend sa place dans mon musée privé, très fermé.⁶³ (Truffaut 1955:45)

This notion of the film *auteur* only gradually started to be adopted in the pages of the *Cahiers*. It evolved in a rather random manner, and this resulted in a theory that can be interpreted and applied in broad terms, and various critics analysed (different) methods within a fluid structure of similar attitudes. This fluidity and prolixity of the theory gave rise to misunderstandings and misinterpretations, especially between the British and the American critics. Issue 31 of the *Cahiers* presents a fine article written again by Truffaut on the subject of Fritz Lang and his 1953 *noir* production, *The Big Heat*. The article is called “Love Fritz Lang”, and the French cineaste refers to the way the filmmaker manages to suffuse filming techniques with so much passion. The conclusion of the article shows the beginnings of a genuine “politique”:

Tout ceci ne donne-t-il pas à penser que Fritz Lang pourrait être un véritable auteur de films, et que si ses thèmes, son histoire empruntent, pour venir jusqu'à nous, l'apparence banale d'un thriller de série, d'un film de genre ou de western, il faut peut-être voir là le signe d'une grande probité d'un cinéma qui n'éprouve pas la nécessité de se parer d'étiquettes alléchantes? Il faut aimer Fritz Lang.⁶⁴ (Truffaut 1954:32)

The “attractive labels” that Truffaut mentions above are a clear reference to the decoding process or operation that this theory requires. The “politique des Auteurs” does not to confine itself simply to the acclamation of a film director as the major author of a film. It actually reveals authors that were never considered as such before. For many years, the model of a cinema *auteur* that was commonly acknowledged was that of the European director, an artist of strong aspirations who had a full control over his works. This model to a great extent still survives nowadays, based on the clear distinction between art films and more popular productions. Many filmmakers who had previously gained a solid reputation in Europe were then rejected or left to anonymity once they crossed the Atlantic. This was

⁶³ When I first watched *Ali Baba*, I was disappointed; the second time, I was upset; and the third, I was fascinated and delighted. I might undoubtedly watch it again but I fully know that once I cross the cape of number three victoriously, any film goes into my private and intimate museum. (*my translation*)

⁶⁴ Doesn't it all make us believe that Fritz Lang could be a real author of films, and that if his themes, his history, take the appearance of a banal thriller series, a film genre or a Western, so as to come to us, one should perhaps see it as a sign of the great probity of a cinema that does not need to bear attractive labels? One has to love Fritz Lang. (*my translation*)

noticeably the case, for example, with the American Hitchcock who was adversely compared with the British Hitchcock, or the American Fritz Lang versus the German Fritz Lang.

Film critic Andrew Sarris was the leading advocate of the “auteur theory” in the United States. In his “Notes on the *Auteur* Theory in 1962” which was inspired by other critics in *Cahiers*, Sarris establishes a list of the fourteen Hollywood directors⁶⁵ he considers worthy of entry into his pantheon. The list, far from being exhaustive, does not include the work of such directors as Billy Wilder or Stanley Kubrick, for example. Attacks in the US were immediately registered both on the excesses expressed by the critics of *Cahiers* and by the provocative list of names proposed by Andrew Sarris. Regarding the *auteur* theory, just as Truffaut did, Sarris considered it to be a “polemical weapon for a given time and a given place” (in Wartenberg & Curran 2005:104). He also added that the contribution of each director to a certain film had less to do, from a stylistic point of view, with the work of other directors on the project than with his own previous work, as he stresses about the *noir* *High Sierra* (1941):

Sometimes, a great deal of corn must be husked to yield a few kernels of internal meaning. I recently saw *Every Night at Eight* [1935] one of the many maddeningly routine films Raoul Walsh has directed in his long career. This 1935 effort featured George Raft, Alice Faye, Frances Langford, and Patsy Kelly in one of those familiar plots about radio shows of the period. The film keeps moving along in the pleasantly unpretentious manner one would expect of Walsh until one incongruously intense scene with George Raft thrashing about in his sleep, revealing his inner fears in mumbling dream-talk. The girl he loves comes into the room in the midst of unconscious avowals of feeling and listens sympathetically. This unusual scene was later amplified in *High Sierra* [1941] with Humphrey Bogart and Ida Lupino. The point is that one of the screen’s most virile directors employed an essentially feminine narrative device to dramatize the emotional vulnerability of his heroes. If I had not been aware of Walsh in *Every Night at Eight*, the crucial link to *High Sierra* would have passed unnoticed. Such are the joys of the *auteur* theory. (in Mast & Marshall 1979:665)

The “joys of the auteur theory” were soon translated into something broader for Sarris, who believed that the *auteur* theory diverged from the theory (or the cinema) of directors. Aware of this, and to avoid being “accused of misappropriating a theory no one

⁶⁵ As an important reference, the list includes the names of Robert Flaherty, John Ford, D. W. Griffith, Howard Hawks, Buster Keaton, and Orson Welles, from the American side; Fritz Lang, Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, Max Ophuls, and Joseph von Sternberg, from the German side; Charles Chaplin, Alfred Hitchcock, from the British directors; and the French Jean Renoir.

wants anymore” (in Wartenberg & Curran 2005:104), he gave the *Cahiers* critics full acknowledgment for the innovative formulation of “an idea that reshaped my thinking on the cinema” (ibid.). Therefore, the *auteur* theory attributed to the director a different position since s/he is then seen as the author of the film or the individual who gives the film any “distinctive quality”. Yet, one may wonder how there can just be a single person when the production of a film and its consequent success involves a full set of people who have left their marks on the final product. In this respect, Sarris conceives the *auteur* theory as three concentric circles, of which the outer circle represents the “technique”, the middle circle “personal style” and the inner circle that of “interior meaning”. The role of the director is to be found in these three circles and hence s/he is designated as a technician, a stylist and an *auteur*. Perhaps for this reason, in his 1996 book *The American Cinema: Directors and Direction 1929-1968*, Sarris would upgrade Wilder to his pantheon and would apologise for having made such a tremendous omission.

Alexandre Astruc is also another major figure in the establishment of this theory back in March 1948 when he compared the new subtlety found in cinema to the writing process and the filmmaker to an “auteur” writing his work with the presence and force of a writer. This notion of the *caméra-stylo* (or “camera-pen”) stresses the idea of directors handling their cameras like pens or painters their paintbrushes and that they need not be constrained by traditional modes of storytelling. Truffaut followed the same line of thought, that of a cinema seen as an industrial process in which we see directors using the commercial apparatus the way a writer uses his pen, and through their *mises-en-scène*, imprinting their personal stamp on their work. In this way, the *auteur* theory appears to be closer to the process of creation than to the critical rereading of films as texts. From that viewpoint, Truffaut’s *politique* is not a theoretical movement but an intimate approach to cinema as an act of love, by registering one’s recognition and love for the director’s body of work. As Bazin suggested it, the theory constitutes a process through which any filmic construction as a standard of reference falls exclusively on its director and this position is even assumed from one film to the next.

I reckon that this attitude sounds a little too ideal to be useful at times, and one cannot ignore the fact that these *auteurist* critics (François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, etc) who used to write about and judge film directors were directors themselves. It is also for this reason that the “politique” is often questioned by critics who

point out the fact that it is only the authority of the director which is being enhanced, whose name has sometimes become more important and relevant than the movie work itself. This point was also made by screenwriters and producers who revolted against their position of subordination since they felt they contributed as much as the director to the film's distinctive style, meaning and success.⁶⁶ I recognise that this theory continues to hold some force; it enabled the reassessment of the "second" careers of cineastes that came to Hollywood. Without it, one would perhaps never have seen due importance given to masterpieces such as *Scarlet Street* or *Rebecca*.

Truffaut's provocation when saying that "there are no good and bad movies, only good and bad directors" further stresses that it is the director's distinctive style or his use of a consistent theme that impacts on the whole body of his work. For the theory, Cameron argues that "on the whole, we accept the cinema of directors", but also adds that it is very difficult "to think of a bad director making a good film and almost impossible for a good director to make a bad one" (in Wartenberg 2005:104). In this regard, these assumptions may contribute to some misinterpretations about what it claims and turn it into something a bit too vague. One should not ignore that "La Politique des Auteurs" was initially seen as a coherent policy when it first appeared, couched in aesthetic terms. The term *auteur* was indeed first perceived as a synonym for "artist" (which also led to much misleading definition on the US side, as seen above), but the new conceptual framework had an important influence on the French film criticism.

When referring to the *auteur* theory, the name of Alfred Hitchcock is instantly mentioned. His legendary techniques in camerawork and storytelling and his themes are accepted as bringing about a revolution in the thriller genre. The skilful ways he treated the genre stamped a recognisable and distinctive mark in his filmmaking and attracting audiences. All in all, this is exactly this type of control gained over the filmic statement that constitutes the core of the *auteur* theory. About Hitchcock, Astruc effectively writes in a special issue that:

Quand un homme depuis trente ans, et à travers cinquante films, raconte à peu près toujours la même histoire : celle d'une âme aux prises avec le mal , et maintient, le long de cette ligne unique, le même style fait essentiellement d'une façon exemplaire de dépouiller les personnages et de les plonger dans l'univers abstrait de

⁶⁶ This hostility was expressed in many different ways. When American novelist and playwright William Goldman first heard about this theory, he is said to have asked: "What's the punchline?"

leurs passions, il me paraît difficile de ne pas admettre que l'on se trouve, pour une fois, en face de ce qu'il y a après tout de plus rare dans cette industrie: un auteur de films.⁶⁷

The quote describes the expectations that the spectator has vis-à-vis systematic aspects, both in terms of themes (“toujours la même histoire”) and stylistically (“le même style”). Hitchcock also expressed ideas largely through visual means, and his ability to characterise unconventional protagonists is also perceptible in this visual expression of thought and psychology. In a *noir* context, for instance, *Strangers on a Train* manages to deal with the issue of transfer of guilt, and to imply homosexual overtones in a visual way (reinforced by showing distorted relationships between men and their mothers) and, globally, the darker side of human nature in, as the above quote states, “une façon exemplaire de dépouiller les personnages”. Another example of visual menace is revealed in *Shadow of a Doubt* whose opening scenes show a distant train approaching in an ominous cloud of black smoke that hangs over the train station as Uncle Charlie arrives in Santa Rosa, giving the impression, as François Truffaut has pointed out, that “the devil was coming to town”. The quote then concludes that the *auteur* theory thus argues that the director is not just simply directing or putting together a pre-existing text; he is not just a *metteur-en-scène*. Robert Siodmak in *The Killers*, for instance, often assumed that the things that he took from Ernest Hemingway’s short story, apart from the tough, hard-boiled style were just catalyst elements, that is, of a man, Swede, who systematically gets tracked down by a pair of hired killers.

Since the seventies the area of film studies has experienced significant shifts, and the theoretical proclamations made at that time, particularly those that were associated with psychoanalysis, have been re-examined. It may be the case that textual analysis of the seventies relied too much on formal and technological aspects of the cinema, and as a result gave exclusive signifying authority to the individual film and showed insufficient respect for the complex nature of the cinematic institution. The argument of the *auteur* theory that it is the distinguishable personality of the director that works as a decisive factor of value, or as Sarris put it, “The way that a film looks and moves should have some

⁶⁷ When a man for over thirty years and through fifty films tells almost always the same story, that of a soul grappling with evil, and maintains, along this unique line, the same style, he is essentially stripping the characters and immersing them in the abstract world of their passions. It seems difficult not to admit that, for once, we are in the presence of what is after all the rarest in the industry: an author of films. (*my translation*)

relationship to the way a director thinks and feels” (in Wartenberg & Curran 2005:105), has gradually given way to a new debate from the point of view of genre theory originating in André Bazin. In April 1957, Bazin wrote an essay entitled “On the Politique des Auteurs” published in *Cahiers* where he raises a number of arguments against *auteurism*, mainly about the fact that the theory refused to recognise the role of the so-called popular culture and, more explicitly, genre. Referring to comedy, the Western, and the gangster film genres, Bazin states, they were built up “in wonderfully close harmony with the public” which is exactly what gives films their “vigour and richness”. It was the centrality of genre, in Bazin’s opinion, that made it possible for directors in Hollywood to produce masterpieces. More specifically, he adds, it is because of the relationship that genre maintains with the audience that reveals “the genius of the system” which is more admirable than the talent of a particular director. It is not my intention here to engage in an exhaustive textual analysis of the *auteur* theory. In any case, the theory, I think, is less a matter of comprehensiveness than of strategy – the recognition, for example, that a detail which might at first appear irrelevant provides a perspective from which other apparently irrelevant details suddenly emerge in another kind of coherence. After all, as Sarris so well put it, “The task of validating the *auteur* theory is an enormous one, and the end will never be in sight” (in Wartenberg & Curran 2005:106).

Although the list of directors that have some claim to *auteur* status is extensive (from Jules Dassin, Samuel Fuller to Anthony Mann, Robert Siodmak, etc), I have decided to concentrate here on three related to *film noir*, as many of the other possible choices are discussed in other parts of this thesis. The filmmakers that I chose are Billy Wilder, Orson Welles, and Otto Preminger, as each produced a substantial body of interesting films and all three were intimately connected with the emergence of *film noir*. And although the *auteur* theory highlights the body of a director’s work rather than isolated masterpieces, I have decided to look at the above directors’ films that are related to the world of *noir*. This analysis, therefore, intends to show the greatness of some of these *auteurs* based on the aesthetics of their productions, concentrating on what is original and how they managed, with intelligence and intuition, to resist to artistic control within the producer-oriented studio systems. I want to stress that their acknowledged pre-eminence is to be found in their ability to establish their own personal expression and style.

Even though the names of Wilder and Preminger are not part of the top-twenty *auteur* list of Andrew Sarris, I wish to discuss the work of these two émigrés for the reasons mentioned above, but also for their courage in violating some of Hollywood's accepted standards of their time. Their "distinguishable personality" as directors may not be easily subsumed to Sarris's "concentric circles", but I think their works speak for themselves, and when, for instance, Preminger creates a whodunit like *Laura*, the viewer is not especially interested in his personality (as it becomes part of the texture of the film), so again this particular premise of the *auteur* theory, in my opinion, does not stand as a strong marker of value. About this second premise (and the *auteur* theory in global term as presented by Sarris), Pauline Kael has also a divergent opinion:

Up to this point there has really been no theory, and now, when Sarris begins to work on his foundation, the entire edifice of civilized standards of taste collapses while he's tacking down his floorboards. (...) But how does this distinguishable personality function as a criterion for judging the works? We recognize the hands of Carné and Prévert in *Le Jour Se Lève*, but that is not what makes it a beautiful film – we can just as easily recognize their hands in *Quai des Brumes* – which is not a good film. (in Wartenberg & Curran 2005:109)

Finally, as I mentioned in the Introduction, in analysing their filmography I seek to isolate their singularity, their fine *noir* achievements, and the way we, as spectators, perceive an extraordinarily distinctive directorial talent. In the light of the *auteur* theory, I hope to draw attention to the way these individual directors were capable of expressing themselves in the unity of form and content by means of personal film technique. Here I am aware that there is a possibility of disagreement with Sarris about Billy Wilder, the director I am about to discuss next, for whom "Joseph L. Mankiewicz and Billy Wilder are other examples of writer-directors without adequate technical mastery" (in Wartenberg & Curran 2005:112). This, however, will also be a good opportunity for me to explain my divergence of opinion concerning Sarris's third premise (the "interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema" as being "extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material") and why he believes writer-directors are barred by this premise.

2.1.1 Billy Wilder

Billy Wilder played a prominent role in making the transition between the studio system and the rise of independent producers-directors. Born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, his career stretches back to the time when he collaborated on several scripts made in Germany, including the semi-documentary *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*) (1929) which traced the rather confusing adventures of working Berliners on their days off and which still remains an important piece in the Weimar cinema. Shortly after the Nazis assumed power in Europe, Wilder fled to France and eventually ended up in America. As he gradually gained some fluency in English, he started to work for various Hollywood studios, writing scripts and contributing to screenplays for Howard Hawks's *Ball of Fire* (1941), for instance, or *Hold Back the Dawn*, directed by Mitchell Leisen and also released in 1941. These scripts approach the subject of unsuspecting men who are enticed by pretty and clever women, and bear the distinctive mark of future *noir* productions. In 1942, Wilder directed his first film *The Major and the Minor*, a comedy which starred Ginger Rogers and Ray Milland.

A couple of years later, he directed one of the seminal *noir* films which he co-wrote with Raymond Chandler, *Double Indemnity*, which provides an essential portrait of the *femme fatale*. As mentioned in the chapter on censorship, the film is also a milestone in Wilder's fight against Hollywood censorship. Moreover, in this particular film, Wilder establishes many of the conventions of *film noir*, namely the *noir* elements that serve as décors in many other films, like the venetian blinds (with their symbolic representation), lighting and voiceover narration, but at the same time, the film bears the signature of a director who knows how to combine the innovative stylistic elements with those of an imaginative narrative.

One year later, in 1945, the Austrian director released *The Lost Weekend*, a bleak and realistic look at the problem of alcoholism. During five days (and a lost weekend), the camera pictures the life of a chronic and tortured alcoholic, Don Birnam (Ray Milland), a *noirish* protagonist who is bedevilled and shadowed by ghosts from his past. The schizoid motif is presented to us through a self-divided protagonist who explains that "There are two Don Birnams: Don the drunk and Don the writer – I've tried to break away from that

guy a lot of times, but it's no good – that other Don always wants us to have a drink". This harrowing psychological drama is related in a dramatic *noir* style, with the city of New York bearing down on him during his long, isolated weekend. Zooming from a shot of the Manhattan skyline to an apartment, the scenes below (fig. 52) show the imprisonment of space and accentuate Don's drama with a whiskey bottle hanging outside his window.

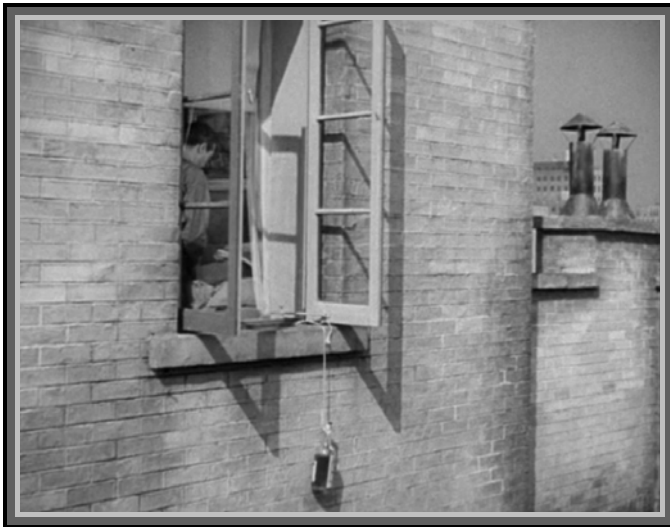


Figure 52. *The Lost Weekend*

Although alcoholism has mostly been avoided in film culture (with few exceptions like Blake Edwards's *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962) or Mike Figgis's *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995)), the topic was a central strand of American modernist writing, from Hemingway to Faulkner to Fitzgerald. Billy Wilder managed to adapt Charles Jackson's novel into a successful screenplay depicting the sufferings and deliriums of Ray Milland's alcoholic desperately searching for a pawnshop to get money to buy a drink. Again the *noir* element is the downward spiral of a man whose alcoholism is just a manifestation of much deeper psychological problems, of repressed homosexuality or fear of that possibility (his dark silhouette reflecting his shadows on the walls heighten this idea). As the weekend progresses, we see a character that tries to erase his problems by drink, shutting out any capacity to relate to others or to the outside world.

The narrative organisation of *The Lost Weekend* is suggestive of personal conflicts and Birnam is led to commit crimes and even spends time in a mental ward. His

performance is full of understated tension as he goes on his alcoholic binge. Visual motifs support this concept of a journey through a hostile and chaotic personal universe. The film is frequently shot from an exceedingly high angle with a number of oblique shadows to intensify the feeling of entrapment in a manner reminiscent of *Witness to Murder* (1954).⁶⁸ Beyond its great social impact, it is believed that this uncompromising film had a tremendous influence on American attitudes towards alcoholism. Although perceived as a rather categorical film by some critics, *The Lost Weekend* proved to be particularly successful vis-à-vis the returning WWII veterans, who were themselves dealing with difficult issues regarding their social reintegration, and alcoholism seemed to serve as a means to help them back into civilian life.⁶⁹



Figure 53. *Sunset Boulevard*

⁶⁸ *Witness to Murder* is a Roy Rowland film, dismissed because of its position late in the *noir* cycle, by which time most of its formal devices – an innocent witness to murder, a hysterical victim to whom the city is indifferent, and a woman trapped in a psycho ward – had become conventions. When it was released it was promoted as “topping the thrills of *Double Indemnity* and *Sorry, Wrong Number*.” The photography is by John Alton and it stars Barbara Stanwyck and George Sanders.

⁶⁹ In the subsequent years that followed Wilder’s film, other similar postwar dramas that touched upon social readjustment of war veterans were made, as is the case of Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives*, in 1946, and Litvak’s *The Snake Pit*, in 1948.

Sunset Boulevard (1950) takes us on a lurid journey through the decay and dementia surrounding an aged silent film star Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), and tells the story of young screenwriter, Joe Gillis (William Holden) who stumbles into her web. The film opens with a scene from Norma's palatial mansion and the swimming pool (in which we see Gillis's dead body floating, face down with his eyes open) which set the scene for the whole film (fig. 53 above). This particular image still remains a source of inspiration in cinema from a technical viewpoint and testifies to the director's greatness. Wilder uses an unsettling low-angle shot, the "fish's eye" shot of Joe, taken from underwater. At that time, this visual perspective was incredibly difficult to be achieved and John F. Seitz (director of photography) and his team considered it would not be viable to balance the light perfectly in and around the pool itself. The same problem was found regarding the surface of the water which would operate as a mirror and obscure the people above it. They eventually managed to film the scene by placing a mirror on the bottom of the pool and filming the protagonist's reflection from above with the policemen standing around the swimming-pool and forming a backdrop.

Just like *Double Indemnity*, the film plays around the protagonist's voiceover narration, sometimes in a cynical style, at others in ironic amusement, and the story flashes back to six months earlier with the depressed Joe, who feels completely dejected about not being able to sell any of his scripts. *Sunset Boulevard* emphasises the boundaries that exist between reality and dream. The element of dream already gives a *noir* tone to the whole film, with the camerawork helping to accentuate the concluding images of a delirious Norma Desmond descending the marble staircase, and announcing maniacally to the camera (and Mr. De Mille) that she is ready for her close-up (fig. 54):

I can't go on with this scene! I'm too happy! Mr. De Mille, do you mind if I say a few words? Thank you. I just want to tell you how happy I am to be back in the studio making a picture again! You don't know how much I've missed all of you. And I promise you, I'll never desert you again because *Salome* will make another picture, and another picture. You see, this is my life. It always will be! (In a whisper) There's nothing else – just us- and the cameras – and those wonderful people out there in the dark. All right, Mr De Mille, I'm ready for my close-up.



Figure 54. *Sunset Boulevard*

Wilder's *oeuvre* is particularly keen on dealing with topics of innocence or deception, as well as dissecting Hollywood's world of illusion. It is also for this reason perhaps that *Sunset Boulevard* is often compared with the complexity of *Citizen Kane* and its exploration of American disillusionment. The film is indeed one of the great original *noirs*, with Norma Desmond being one of the supreme (if irregular) *femmes fatales* (and, for that matter, Gillis may be an *homme fatal* too). Despite some uncommon negative reviews (like the ones included in *The New Yorker* which depicted the film as "a pretentious slice of Roquefort", containing only "the germ of a good idea" (in Staggs 2002:111)), the film is clearly a challenge to the arrogant trumperies of silent Hollywood and to thirties social realism, following Wilder's liberal-humanist tradition. In short, the entire film is a combination of a *noir* "behind the scenes" Hollywood story, a sardonic black comedy / drama and a corrosive character study. It remains the most impressive attack on the futility and arrogance of the movie business.

Co-written, produced and directed by Billy Wilder, *Ace in the Hole* (1951) also had the features of a studio *auteur* film. The film was inspired by two real-life events: the first involved Floyd Collins, who in 1925 was trapped inside a cave, and the second, which

occurred in April 1949, about a three-year old boy who tragically fell into an abandoned well. In both cases, the victims died before they were reached by rescuers. Revolving around the first event, the film portrays Kirk Douglas, in the role of Chuck Tatum, a down-at-heel writer and reporter, who hears about a local man who got trapped in a collapsing cave while hunting for ancient Indian relics. The film is organised around a metaphorical axis between Tatum's audience (the seedy media and thousands of people who flock to the site) and ourselves, Wilder's audience. As one of the most derisive denunciations of media sensationalism and manipulation, *Ace in the Hole* became notorious for its cutting social critique. In an interview on the way the film depicts how some people exploit the tragedies of others, Billy Wilder replied:

Our man, the reporter, was played by Mr. Kirk Douglas. Now, he was on the skids and he thought that a great story would get him back into the big time, big leagues. He remembered the Floyd Collins story. They composed a song, they were selling hot dogs there was a circus up there, literally a circus, people came. I was attacked by every paper because of that movie. They loathed it. It was cynical, they said. (in Silver & Ursini 2003:111)

The rescue location is turned into an authentic carnival in the film (the title was actually changed to *The Big Carnival* just prior to its release), with all sorts of amusement and games, until the day a catastrophe happens and the whole staged festivity is brought to an end. The attempt to rescue Leo Minosa is almost conceived as a theatrical show, emphasising the hypocritical and manipulative aspects of the whole situation. All of these characteristics are carefully highlighted by Billy Wilder (fig. 55), which includes an interview with the fated man, a contemporary tune entitled "We're Coming, Leo", sung by the spectators to cheer him up. The story then concludes with these same people gathering macabre souvenirs from around the death cave. Wilder's frontal attitude and courage were again put in evidence in the script, when Tatum is seen to conspire with the local sheriff. For this reason, the head of the Hays Code office insisted that this particular conspiratorial scene, involving a crooked law enforcement officer, would either have to be completely removed from the film or to have the sheriff paying for his fraudulent actions.

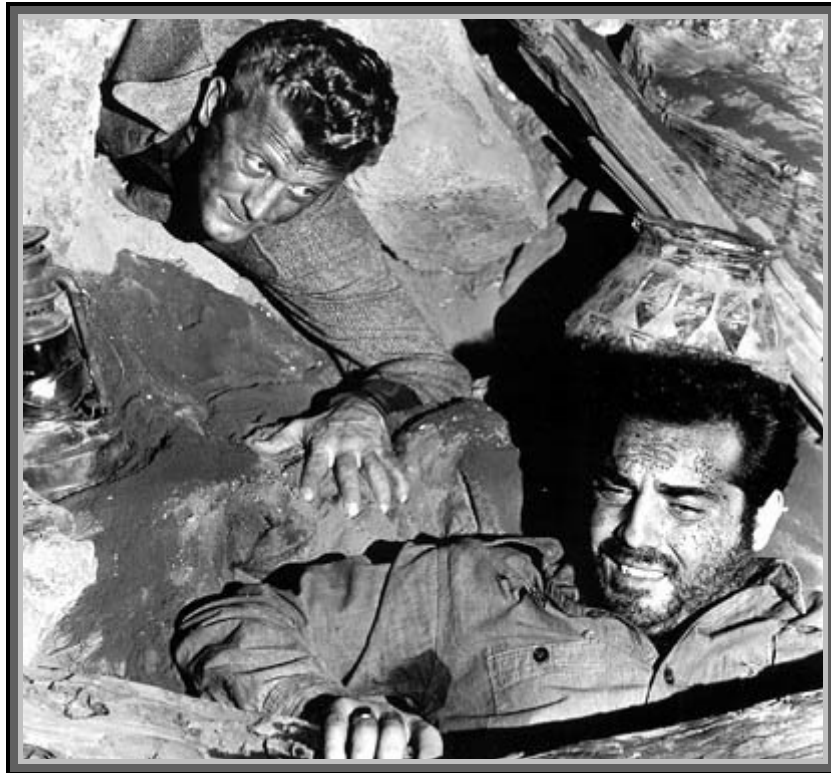


Figure 55. *Ace in the Hole*

All of Billy Wilder *noirish* dramas discussed in this section contain biting but intelligent social content, a tone of withering disapproval that became his trademark. In Wilder's *noir* vision, the individual's plight is seen as unmoving by the neglect of his fellow human beings, as in *Ace in the Hole*, even as they imitate concern (cynical rejection of humanity). From the serious examination of alcoholism (*The Lost Weekend*), to the reclusive silent film star who dreams of a comeback (*Sunset Boulevard*), to the dark cynicism which smacks of over-protestation (*Ace in the Hole*), or still *Double Indemnity* which characteristically reveals Neff's fatal "ride to the end of the line", Billy Wilder's characters always seem to present his dry view of human existence. They have a sense of cruel, inevitable fate viewed with mordant humour. As seen, Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* descends the main staircase in search for stardom, and the flinty and ambitious Chuck Tatum in *Ace in the Hole* also metaphorically goes all the way down in a (personal) cave-in. The same traumatic descent is felt in Birnam from *The Lost Weekend* and Neff in *Double Indemnity* collapses even before reaching the lift that would, figuratively, take him all the way down to Mexico.

Imbuing his films with this distinctive and recognisable style, Wilder was able to realise the claims made for the *auteur* thanks to his originality. He was a tough and independent writer who did not need the mode of indirection of *noir*. His courage (others may call it cynicism or callousness) was expressed in fearless films which unusually deal with a social problem frontally. His individual insights and approaches make him the most distinctive Euro-filmmaker, renowned in Hollywood front office for teasing audiences' sensibilities. With his widely known and influential *oeuvre*, Wilder remains as one of the best screenwriters of all time. Even in death, he chose to fly the flag for the misprised craft of screenwriting (fig. 56).

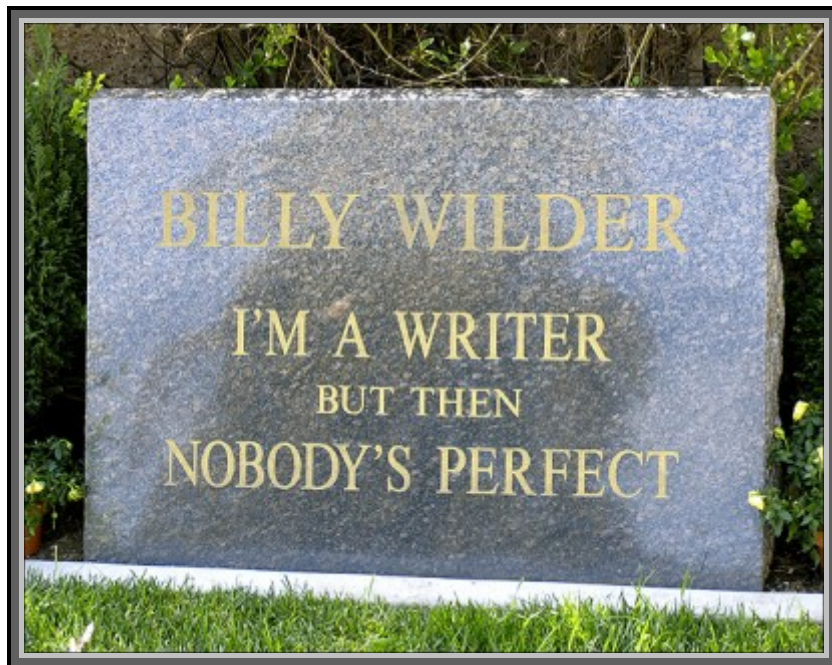


Figure 56. *Billy Wilder*

2.1.2 Orson Welles

He may have only directed twenty-seven films, but George Orson Welles also worked as a screenwriter, producer and actor. At the age of eighteen, Welles was already a well-known actor in experimental theatre, and in the thirties, his New York adaptations of *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* established his reputation. During this time he got seriously involved in political activism through his journalism (as a reporter) and several radio programmes. At twenty-five, Welles revolutionised the procedures of cinematic shooting with hitherto untapped technical resources (new depth of field with pioneering light and sound techniques and richness of composition). Possessed of all the innovations and the advancements of the sound era, he borrowed many of them from his radio experience. Welles's extensive career in film is also usually associated with his disputes with major studios which were continually imposing pressure on his work to guarantee artistic control. Perhaps for this reason, many of his productions were sent back to be reworked, while others simply never came to light. Yet, it was in 1941, when he was only twenty-six that Orson Welles truly came to fame when he co-wrote, directed, produced and starred in *Citizen Kane*, which has been admired almost universally as a major creative innovation, making Welles a decisive *auteur*.

Welles expertly guides us through Charles Foster Kane's life and career in *Citizen Kane* and gives us the necessary clues about the mystery of the "Rosebud". Owner of a multimillionaire retreat property, almost like a kingdom, Charles Foster is a publishing tycoon, as well as a political activist and extravagant art collector. One day, in his castle-like mansion in Xanadu, Kane dies all alone, uttering the word "Rosebud". Although the film answers the central riddle, the true meaning of that Rosebud goes beyond any final explanation or judgement about its complex protagonist. For Mankiewicz (the screenwriter), Kane's last utterance served to explain the course his life had taken. For Welles, it was simply a dramatic device, the kind of faked argument that Hitchcock would later call a "McGuffin". Instead of resolving anything, the film's ending offers a number of contradictory conclusions.

Both Orson Welles and Joseph Cotten (in the role of Jedediah Leland) play major roles in the film - Leland turns out to have scant ambition and his few attempts at moral

persuasion with Kane badly fail. On the other hand, the cinematic techniques used and the moral symbolism (implied in the issue of real-life newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, in this case) had a strong impact on *film noir*. One of these major techniques was the deep focus image in which everything, from foreground to background, is evenly sharp. In many scenes of the film the action in the far background assumes as much importance as the events taking place in the foreground. This is apparent, for example, in the arresting scene that places Kane prominently in the foreground so that he dwarfs the tiny figure of Susan (Dorothy Comingore), lost in the depths of Xanadu's vast hearth.



Figure 57. *Citizen Kane*

It is visually, therefore, that the film forges a dramatic style (conceived by Welles and his renowned cinematographer Gregg Toland), combining such techniques as extreme deep focus, varied camera angles including low angles revealing set ceilings or windows, and unconventional use of lighting and deep shadows, typically found in the *film noir* style.

For example, in the scene above (fig. 57), as Charles Foster Kane screams after Boss J.W. “Big Jim” Gettys (Ray Collins), various elements interrelate. As Gettys descends the stairs, the camera pans up to bad-tempered Kane who is leaning forward over the guard rail, his figure looking smaller and awry, compared to the upright figure of Gettys as he comes down the stairs. The staircase, moreover, has a meaning well beyond its function in which this particular scene plays out. It serves as a point of intersection between the two figures, but simultaneously as an obstacle. Still visually, we see the two antagonistic characters inside the same deep plane of focus thanks to the camera angles and *mise-en-scène*, and symbolically, a staircase⁷⁰ with the guardrail and banister posts holding Kane back from any possible action.

In conclusion, it is at the visual / stylistic level, I believe, that *Citizen Kane* achieves its place at the *noir* canon. The unconstrained camerawork by Toland in such scenes, or in the famous library sequence, remains an extraordinary example of film Expressionism. The scenes below also show some good example of the panoply of optical effects that future films benefited from. The manifestly obvious choice of *trompe-l’oeil* actually increases the sinister atmosphere of the house (fig. 58), while the amazing optical trick used in fig. 59 not only enhances the immense proportions of interior sets (in this case the interiors of Xanadu, but also those of Thatcher’s library or Bernstein’s office), it also emphasises the enormous intrigue that encloses the whole feature. Most scenes are actually filmed one frame within another, with reflections all over the place, and the use of deep focus technique, as both figures below show. In fact, the finale of the film is emblematic of this technique: the use of framing Charles Foster Kane inside a frame closes him off from anybody else around him. The symbolism behind the framed images of Kane, while he walks through the corridor past some framed mirrors, constitute an intriguingly structured manner of retelling the memories of a man, and his final words gain additional meaning, as if he is trapped within himself and the captivity of his affluence. Welles used here an optical printer, i.e., a film projector mechanically coupled to a camera, enabling the director achieve the enormous close-up of Kane’s lips murmuring “Rosebud”. With the aid of the optical printer, the film manages to create these extraordinary visual transitions, and in Welles’s hands they certainly acquire a unique versatility.

⁷⁰ The symbol of staircases and mirrors will be further explored in Part IV.



Figure 58. *Citizen Kane*



Figure 59. *Citizen Kane*

As Leo Braudy in *The World in a Frame* puts it, it is beyond these frames that objects can gain a new life:

Unlike novels and paintings, where the world is totally and obviously created by the artist, in films (...) we may still feel that the objects are there by chance and may at any moment vanish or extend themselves into the life beyond the frame. Thus, (...) films have the capacity to present an enclosed world of total meaning at the same time that they offer the possibility of another reality outside these momentary limits. (Braudy 1976:78)

A couple of years later, Welles released *Journey into Fear* (1943), his third film for RKO, and which again starred Joseph Cotten and Orson Welles (he was actually the producer and uncredited director). This *noir* production offers a persuasive demonstration of how easily the now twenty-six-year-old Welles could have fitted into the Hollywood system as the head of a production unit. Although the film's nominal director was Norman Foster, a discreetly talented and modest director, it was Welles who was originally assigned to direct the film himself and ensured that the film bore his stylistic imprint. To some critics, *Journey into Fear* reveals some significant aspects of a personality and sensibility that Welles would further expand in his subsequent films, such as *The Stranger* and *The Lady from Shanghai*. Carl Macek also notes that "the overriding sense of dread that permeates the film combines with a visual style that uses contrasts between light and shade as a metaphor for the instability and futility typical of the *noir* universe" (in Silver 1992:149). Much of the film takes place aboard a dilapidated freighter (a claustrophobic atmosphere is conferred on the film), and relates a murky study of espionage, realistically portrayed in all its confusion. The lighting plunges vast areas into darkness and creates a flickering play of light and shadow on the faces of actors in motion. A visually arresting film, with extreme camera angles and overhead shots, and scenes of night and rain, *Journey into Fear* offers the unusual narration of Howard Graham (Joseph Cotten) as a shrinking counterpoint to the intimidating *noir* atmosphere and the ironic characterisation of Peter Banat (Jack Moss), an assassin hired to kill Graham.

In July 1946, RKO released another Orson Welles film, *The Stranger* in which Welles, as usual, tries to impose his personality on the film and interferes with the screenplay. In it, he plays the role of Franz Kindler alias Charles Rankin, a supposed college professor in a small New England college community. While waiting for the emergence of the Fourth Reich, he teaches in the local school and marries Mary Longstreet

(Loretta Young), a judge's daughter. He is indeed a fugitive war criminal and his escape to the United States was engineered by government agents in the hopes of trailing the zealous Nazi to his superiors. Assaulted by the constant probings of Wilson (Edward G. Robinson), one of the agents from his Nazi past, Kindler has no other alternative but to dispose of the unwanted government agent. The film contains many expressive symbols from a semiotic perspective, though it is an unusual *noir* movie. From the opening sequence, the moody tension is evoked in a small-town environment. The South American ports through which we see a Nazi official being stalked by agents create a dramatic crescendo; the beautiful woods are converted into a powerful whirlpool of swirling leaves that reveal the body Kindler furiously tries to cover up; a death-trap involving a high ladder; and, finally, the huge dark clock tower⁷¹ with medieval statues that looms over the little village and which, in a frenetic climax at the end of the film, plays a deadly part for Kindler (he falls to his death impaled by the clock mechanism).

Forced to follow the control of his producers (Welles found himself under the direct authority of independent producer Sam Spiegel), Welles took on a screenplay written by others (namely Anthony Veiller) and filmed *The Stranger* with the desired efficiency. Even so, he managed to take his visual style a step further and created some visually fresh and striking images. In fact, the movie reveals many more stylistic characteristics of *film noir* with other instances of low-key lighting, asymmetric or dramatic compositions, and radical camera angles, when compared to *The Big Clock*, for example. Despite using visually uninspiring sets - much of the action is unfolded in the streets of the village, Rankin's house and the church (the central and dominant feature) - cinematographer Russell Metty, stimulated by the bold chiaroscuro of early *film noir*, was able to introduce a more fluid element in the film. Instead of using deep focus and potent lights, Metty opted to create unstable visual compositions with lighting that brought the human figure into austere emphasis – even in the great scenes of Rankin alone in the woods at night – to the detriment of facial detail. Metty's contribution and Welles's touch on some arresting visual scenes infused *The Stranger* with intense dramatic tension that is present throughout the narrative of the film.

A complex mystery story, involving a puzzle-within-a-puzzle, *The Lady from Shanghai* is yet another imaginative and creative *film noir*, with fascinating visuals and

⁷¹ The symbol of the clock reminds us of John Farrow's *The Big Clock* (see subchapter "Against the Clock" p. 279).

slanting compositions, and brilliant camerawork by Charles Lawton, Jr. Orson Welles shows again his singular talents, working with a *film noir* narrative and stylistic conventions, fashioning a tale of passion and lust, adultery, and betrayal. In visual terms the film displays much of the imagery used in Welles's later film, *Touch of Evil*. Both films start with a vivid re-creation of a Mexican nightmare out of the strange décor of Venice, California and location photography. While in *The Lady* the city is quickly replaced by the lush tropical locale of the Caribbean, which in turn gives way to the trial and Chinatown; in *Touch of Evil* it is a seedy border town in Mexico that dominates the film. And both films are full of shifting imagery and wild nightmares, which are illustrated with baroque juxtaposition and misleading imagery. For *The Lady*, the fundamental concept that both Lawton, Jr. and Welles applied was to use light to enhance the contrast between the diverse scenes, almost as if several different films were being made.

The final sequence of *The Lady from Shanghai* with its celebrated hall of mirrors confrontation (see fig. 104 on p. 359) constitutes another brilliant moment of camerawork. To shoot this particular scene, a painted mirror had to be placed in front of the lens to represent a panel of cracked glass that would create the impression of watching the action through a broken two-way mirror. The mirrors visually split apart and duplicate the characters representing their various (ambivalent) natures. Amid shattering images of Elsa (Rita Hayworth) and the crippled lawyer, Arthur Bannister (Everett Sloane), the truth about Grisby's (Glenn Anders) death is revealed. Michael (Orson Welles) walks away from the dying Elsa, alone and ultimately ambivalent about the entire affair. If Mike is duplicated visually, he may be duping the viewer as well, by making them believe they have all the answers. The duplicity of the film itself and the disruptive narrative create a greater degree of difficulty for the viewer.

Of all his Hollywood films, *Touch of Evil* is the one in which there is the greatest degree of improvisation, with Welles persistently exploring new possibilities during the course of a shot that had initially been very cautiously planned. The over-three minute nonstop tracking shot opening the film is generally accepted by critics to be one of the greatest long takes in cinematic history. The shot begins with a close-up of a time bomb and then cranes up to reveal the bomb being planted in a car before exploding as it crosses the Mexican border into the United States. Cinematographer Metty – who had worked on *The Stranger* and was now with Universal – and Welles carefully calculated this impressive

start, alternating, within the fluid movement of this single long take, between full shots, medium close-ups and close-ups. Globally, Welles expresses a consistently extreme aesthetics through the cinematography. He basically uses three main technical features, which are the violent contrasts, disorienting angles and the use of wide-angle lenses. The majority of the film takes place at night, not only on the streets of Los Robles, but also in the interiors, where potent lighting enhances the shadows cast by the set and by the actors. This nocturnal view of the city is a crucial aspect of the film, since it allowed Welles and Metty to fill it with all the necessary filmic equipment to cast the shadows that give its walls sinister life and to light its tall arcades whose geometrical shapes created a visual metaphor of a decomposing maze.

The visual objectifications that I described in the previous chapter are again specified in Welles's films, especially in *The Lady from Shanghai* for using the mirrors and their reflections as obvious symbols of the protagonists' duality. These *noir* productions and his unique form of *film noir* show the stages of Welles's development as a filmmaker and as an experimenter in his working methods according to the aesthetic results he wanted to achieve. Renowned for his innate aesthetic sensibilities and for his innovative approach with the camera, Welles is also often viewed as the director who used the "first person singular" technique or the "one-man band" approach due to his ability to undertake all the roles in the filmmaking process (from art director and screenwriter, to costume designer and even musical arranger). Perhaps because of that, Welles adopted an ambivalent view of the medium, making many polemical statements that ranged from assigning the art of filmmaking to a single individual to attacking the cult of the director. Indeed, somewhat against the *auteur* theory, Welles concludes his meditation about his own creative art with the meandering investigation of authorship and authenticity in *F for Fake* (initially released in 1974). In it, he condemns the cult of the director and mentions the work of thousands whose names were never recorded, concluding that "Maybe a man's name doesn't matter that much after all".

2.1.3 Otto Preminger

Austrian film director Otto Preminger moved from the theatre to Hollywood, and his *noir* debut took place when he directed the 20th Century-Fox film version of Vera Caspary's mystery novel *Laura*, in 1944. In fact, the way Preminger develops the topic of obsession in *Laura* is particularly powerful, dividing the compulsion between three different characters, three men whose interrelationships develops in mysterious ways, building a melodrama of unusual cadence. Dana Andrews, in the role of shrewd Lt. Mark McPherson; Clifton Webb, as egocentric and caustic columnist Waldo Lydecker; and Vincent Price, as gold-digging, two-timer Shelby Carpenter, Laura's fiancé, all come to be haunted by the spell of the memory of Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney), an elegant publicist who has been killed by a shotgun blast. As a *noir* narrative, the story is told in



Figure 60. *Laura*

flashback, and the dreamlike almost ethereal presence of Laura sets the *noir* Freudian tone of this whodunit story. Detective McPherson, through the testimony of Laura's friends and letters, comes to know Laura posthumously and slowly falls in love with the dead woman, mainly dazzled by her portrait which hangs on the big living room wall over the fireplace (fig. 60).

From a semiotic perspective, the film contains familiar motifs which will be further analysed in the next Part. The portrait is indeed the most relevant of these as it embodies the absent Laura: one night McPherson falls asleep while watching the portrait on the wall and is suddenly awakened by the sound of Laura who shows up to him like a dream or a ghost. Similarly to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the portrait here becomes the analysis of a man's desire to impose their imaginary visions of idealised femininity onto women. All three men, especially McPherson during his investigation, are put into a trance by the enthralling Laura's enigma and magnetism transmitted through the portrait. The above scene shows the employment of *noir* trademarks, beyond the shadowy black-and-white cinematography. In the centre of the living-room, the supercilious art critic stretches his right arm out to the portrait of Laura who has become a personification of his refined aesthetic ideals. The meaningful look that he gives McPherson emphasises how much he himself is a self-centred man, despising McPherson's "muscular and handsome" (his own words) physicality and establishing the link between the portrait of Laura (appropriately painted by Lydecker) and the fascination McPherson feels for Laura, who may be just a figment of his imagination. All these subtexts constitute an interesting theme of the image and raises questions about the role of the movie and the spectator as prone to similar fixations.

One year later, in 1945, Otto Preminger brings back Dana Andrews to star, this time as a drifter, Eric Stanton, who is pushed off a San Francisco bus for lack of money. He lands in *Pop's Eats*, a diner where he immediately develops a fondness for a sexy restaurant waitress named Stella (Linda Darnell) and on whom everybody in town seems to have a crush. Preminger returns to his familiar territory of moral ambiguity in *Fallen Angel*, using Andrews as a personification of indecisiveness: he imagines if he had money Stella would eventually respond to his advances. He marries the local spinster June Mills (Alice Faye), as a prelude to a quick divorce and anticipated cash settlement to go back to his waitress. The moral ambiguity is further stressed when, on learning about his dishonest

plans, June still shows her love for him. The plot gets even more twisted when Stella is found murdered and Stanton emerges as the leading suspect. Again, this film underlines both Preminger's supremely cinematic extended-take style and the world of his characters.

Whilst *Laura* marked a significant directional turn for *film noir*, which began taking steps outside the original shadowy confines of street wise detectives, and ruthless *femmes fatales* who would stop at nothing to get their way, *Fallen Angel*, along with other *noir* films of late forties, seem to insist on increasingly pervasive elements, namely moral ambiguity and victimisation. The film certainly boasts some very fine Joseph LaShelle cinematography, duplicating the now familiar *noir* angles and shadows, but its more conscious and analytical use of *noir* "shadowy tropes proves both a continuation and a deepening of Preminger's use of moral ambiguity as a tool of human insight" (Croce 2006). In his article, Croce mentions that:

As always with Preminger, no character can be summed up in a single word, their introduction offering shorthand traits (Andrews's moodiness, Darnell's dark whorishness, Faye's blond nobility) which will be contradicted during the course of the film. (...) Preminger's refusal to draw easy conclusions - his pragmatic curiosity for people - is reflected in his remarkable visual fluidity, the surveying camera constantly moving, shifting duelling points-of-view in order to give them equal weight. (*ibid*)

The type of description referred to above is sufficiently underlined by the class distinction that *Fallen Angel* exposes. Emphasising the good girl - bad girl syndrome employed in numerous mystery *noir* films analysed so far (*Murder, My Sweet; Out of the Past*; etc), Preminger's *Fallen Angel* insists even more on the seamy underbelly of provincial life and on this particularly seedy aspect of post-World War II America. Finally, while many would argue that the film lacks the heady combination of desperation, impending doom and paranoia found in the classic *noir* film, *Fallen Angel* manages to demonstrate the problems besetting the common man tempted by new social opportunities, as evidenced by Detective McPherson's entering the world of Manhattan's rich and famous and drifter Eric Stanton groping for stability and ultimately finding himself at odds and disgusted by his own corrupt behaviour.

It is from this detachment and objectivity and "his pragmatic curiosity for people", as Croce suggests, that Otto Preminger's status as an *auteur* has often been defined. When analysed as an *auteur*, Preminger is also often referred to as a show-business phenomenon,

as he was one of the few film directors to have imposed an image on the public mind. He seems to have managed to do this with a stamp of authority as distinctive as Hitchcock's cameo appearances in his own films. From quite early on, while he was still a contract director at Twentieth Century Fox, Preminger had started to operate as his own producer, and a dozen years later he established himself as an independent producer-director. This fact enabled him to come up with a very mixed collection of films, from a series of *noir* productions in the forties to comedies (such as *The Moon Is Blue*, 1953) in the fifties and contemporary institutional subjects, such as *Exodus* (1960) or *Advise & Consent*, in the sixties.

The Preminger-Andrews creative association continued with the release of *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, also a reunion with Gene Tierney. Dana Andrews plays again the role of a Detective, Sgt Mark Dixon, who accidentally kills Ken Paine (Craig Stevens) while investigating a murder and then proceeds to cover up his guilt. The majority of the film depicts a brand of violence that has become a *noir* motif in Preminger's filmography, one that lurks below urban society. Moreover, the film succeeds in showing the darker side of the police as many other *noir* films went on to do. As a police officer, Dixon is already in trouble with his superiors for his oppressive tactics and his contempt for all criminals (because his father had been one) leads him to a Freudian re-enactment of parental guilt. The film reflects once more the penchant that the director has for exploring human vulnerability, portraying Dixon as an archetypal *noir* anti-hero, in the role of a brutal New York police detective that seeks to conceal his guilt while continuing his search for a killer on whom to pin the murder. His plight becomes yet more frantic and the *noir* plot undergoes a further twist when he falls in love with the widow Morgan (Gene Tierney) of the murdered man.

The two scenes below show Dixon in curious but expressive compositions. In fig. 61, Dixon turns his back to his girlfriend, Morgan, while she is being questioned by his colleague, one of the investigators. Trying to light his cigarette, his two hands and face show emotional despair. The camerawork is particularly judicious and assumes the task of exposing his guilt to the spectator, as Dixon, turning to us, takes up a posture of supplication. In fig. 62, Dixon assumes the central position in the middle of the frame, but, at a distance, he attempts to divert the investigation from himself. Although brutal and fatalistic, Dixon reassesses his life towards the end, desperate for redemption. In these two



Figure 61. *Where the Sidewalk Ends*



Figure 62. *Where the Sidewalk Ends*

particular scenes, the viewer can see the skilled cinematography and film direction of *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, and its visual treatment of themes such as the psychological pressure of guilt and liberation.

Where the Sidewalk Ends was the last of Otto Preminger's studio pictures at Fox. Along with *Laura* and *Fallen Angel*, the film constitutes an important *noir* trilogy of Preminger as *auteur*. When watching his films, apart from a remarkable, fluid *mise-en-scène* and singular camerawork, his consistency in maintaining the moral ambiguity of his characters is notable. In fact, the characters displayed in these three films all have a primary struggle within themselves; Preminger's crowded *mise-en-scènes* (see figs 61 and 62) are filled with incredible tension. In this way, Preminger has a rather unique way of highlighting interpersonal dynamics with scenes that intensify the characters' aggressive relationships with one another. This in fact constitutes his personal hallmark, an approach of detachment and neutrality towards his characters and above all with his audience. In an article called "Why Preminger?" published in the magazine *Movie* in November 1962, the answer to this question, when analysing Preminger as an *auteur*, is essentially revealed in his directorial attitude:

His aim is to present characters, actions and issues clearly and without prejudice. This objectivity is a mark of his respect for his characters and, particularly, for his audience. He presupposes an intelligence active enough to allow the spectator to make connections, comparisons and judgements (...) His films are about ways of reaching decisions – on facts and on courses of action (...) Fluidity (of development, not indecision) distinguishes Preminger's visual style as it distinguishes his narrative method and his moral attitude. (Wood 1962:18)

In conclusion, Otto Preminger's American career can be divided into two different phases: a first period during which he worked for Twentieth-Century Fox, and a second, when he became a prominent independent producer-director trying to take on the studio system in various ways. For many years, Preminger marked his position and went against institutional censorship by releasing some films without the usual Motion Picture Association seal (for instance, *The Moon is Blue* released in 1953). Moreover, he tackled various contentious subjects that studios might not approve of, such as criticism of the War Department in *The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell* (1955) or homosexuality in *Advise and Consent* (1962). For the purposes of this chapter, I have obviously concentrated on the first period of his career which is the one that was notable for his *noir* productions and for his well-publicised conflicts with his studio boss Darryl F. Zanuck. The two individuals were odds on the subject of casting, and Preminger found it difficult to conform to his demands or to work without retaining overall artistic control. The first prominent claim made for Preminger as an *auteur* artist was published by Jacques Rivette from *Cahiers du Cinéma* back in 1954, during the seedbed years of the *auteur* theory. Rivette believed that Otto Preminger, along with film directors such as Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, and Fritz Lang would:

(...) first believe in their themes and then build the strength of their art upon this conviction. Preminger believes first in *mise en scène*, the creation of a precise complex of sets and characters, a network of relationships, an architecture of connections, an animated complex that seems suspended in space. (Rivette 1985:132)

In contrast to the other two directors described earlier, Preminger used a different formula in a period when American cinema appeared to be subjugated by mainstream genre works. With a penchant for a certain thematic line, his dramatic motifs showed ambitious and provocative connections. Then, his fluidity, as I have stressed here, is achieved through a visual style that is characterised by long takes, with extensive camera movements holding two or more characters in a primary, objective shot at all times, avoiding cutting down a scene into shots or counter-shots. As the *Movie* introduction states, "Hence the vital importance which Preminger attached to his scripts. All that he has to say or show is in the development of his narrative and the moral evolution of his characters" (Wood 1962:18) or, as Preminger once said in an interview, "I always like to

project my viewpoint on the audience without them knowing it” (Wood 1962:19). On the whole, Preminger’s work also remains admirable for the fact that he was able to challenge both the value of the classical Hollywood system and the *auteurship* possible within it, even defined by it. In this way, we get to see Preminger the *auteur* from the perspective of a filmmaker with the personality of a producer; a man who held an interest in institutions but who at the same time could confront institutional Hollywood.

IV. Semiotic Analysis of Key *Noir* Movies

1 From a Semiotic Perspective

It seems a strange thing when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact that the entire universe – not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part (...) is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs (Peirce 1998:394)

As mentioned in the introduction, the main objective of this part is to discuss the notion of film “symbol” from a semiotic perspective, as suggestive of certain abstractions, and understand how icons in the films of the classic *noir* era are part of a consistent signifying pattern. I will describe as systematically as possible the symbols portrayed in given scenes to provide the reader with clear evidence of *film noir*’s unique methods of visual signification.

Semiotics has been criticised as an imperialistic discipline but at the same time commended as being the most wide-ranging of fields. I believe the overarching meta-discipline of semiotics brings a new and rich conceptualisation to forms of human expression. Theorist Jonathan Culler acknowledges that “the major problem of semiotics is its ambitions,” but positively recognises that its “value (...) is linked to its unwillingness to respect boundaries, (...) to the conviction that everything is a sign” (in Suhor 1984:247).

From the very beginning of time and throughout human evolution, human beings have always tried to make sense of or to create meaning through the establishment and interpretation of “signs”. Charles Sanders Peirce was the American philosopher who first coined the term “semiotics”. Other theoreticians argue though that the term was first created by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, when he presented a series of lectures on structural linguistics at the beginning of the twentieth century. I agree with this view, based on the fact that semiotics is generally attributed to his theories rather than Peirce’s and that his theories are still now being used and have had a greater influence when it comes to film theory. My discussion will therefore concentrate on his theories. I am obviously not ignoring here what John Locke, back in the seventeenth-century,

postulated as the “doctrine of signs” under the name of *semeiotiké*, or when, in 1764, Johann H. Lambert wrote a specific treaty called *Semiotik*. The term, deriving from the Greek word *semeîon* (sign) and *sema* (signal), gave rise to various others, like *semeiotica* or *semology*. The classical period was particularly fervent in terms of philosophical debates round the issues of the nature of representation. From Platonic Realism (regarding the existence of universals, i.e. the belief that forms and abstractions such as “humanity” and “truth” exist regardless of human perception in sensory terms), to Aristotelian Realism (the view that universals exist simply as types or properties and away from objects of the external world) the main belief has been that the world is as we perceive it, almost in the reductive “seeing is believing” sense. This obviously had been the subject of debate (as is the concept of “real” for that matter), as early as when John Locke stressed this idea in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) when he referred to *semeiotiké*, as “the business whereof is to consider the nature of signs the mind makes use of for the understanding of things, or conveying its knowledge to others” (in Deely 1994:109).

It is relevant to say that Peirce states that “we think only in signs” (ibid.) as they can come with the appearance of words or sounds, images, objects, odours, etc. Peirce, however, also notes that “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign”. Therefore, a sign may be almost anything provided that we decide to attribute a certain meaning to it or understand it as signifying something, and usually representing something other than itself. Different systems of conventions are all unconsciously related to the manner we interpret signs. It is this consequential use of signs which is at the core of the concerns of semiotics.

Before Saussure, the study of language had been mainly diachronic, that is, directed at its changing forms across history; Saussure distinguishes his area of concern as synchronic, how a language works at a given moment as a rule-governed system. To do this he introduces a “dyadic”, two further distinctions, between **langue** (the system of a particular language allowing someone to generate a meaningful sentence, according to rules for word-formation and sentence structure) and **parole** (what a person utters, their writing or speech), between **signifier** (*signifiant*, the form which the sign takes) and **signified** (*signifié*, the thing or *concept* it represents). On challenging this commonsense notion of “words”, Saussure reactivated the distinction between signifier and signified. Their relationship is referred to as “signification” and when the two are joined together they form a sign.

The implications of the signifier / signified distinction have come to touch many areas of contemporary thought, including film theory. Although language has been an object of analysis over the centuries, it is only recently that it has been accepted as a fundamental paradigm for all scientific and non-scientific areas, notably in the artistic and intellectual, and communicative areas. Major thinkers from the twentieth-century, such as Wittgenstein, Cassirer, Heidegger, Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty, Nöth and Derrida have tried to rework the concept of semiotics within a broader context of the human language and thought. The notion still remains a rather difficult object of analysis in the contemporary world. I believe, however, that semiotics must be seen as a comprehensive and multidisciplinary paradigm, with its manifestations in different cultural forms, and subject to critical inspection of its own definitions and procedures.

In his *Cours de linguistique générale* (published posthumously in 1916 and taught by his disciples Charles Bally and Albert Séchehaye), Saussure not only elaborates on his base paradigm of *langue / parole* but he also made the critical point that the conventions that rule the sign system are very arbitrary, which means that there is not necessarily a correlation between the word (the signifier) and the object or idea it represents (the signified). This arbitrariness is present in all the various languages around the world, and it is this arbitrary relationship between these two parts that make it possible to function as a linguistic system.

Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* (1957) carried Saussure's ideas into other domains of cultural theory, creating with others a new theoretical system known as "Structuralism". Whether spontaneous or poetic, the aim of any structuralist activity is to reconstitute an "object" so as to make clear in this reconstitution the rules of functioning (the "functions") of the object. There are other acts / activities *other than language* which produce meanings, social and cultural ones, like in sports, for example, that show that there are other sign systems. Hence, semiotics becomes a useful tool to analyse the process of meaning production in all the arts (literature, cinema, television) and, ultimately, in other forms of cultural production, as Barthes notes in his book about the myths of French society of that time:

On trouvera ici deux déterminations: d'une part une critique idéologique portant sur le langage de la culture dite de masse; d'autre part un premier démontage sémiologique de ce langage: je venais de lire Saussure et j'en tirai la conviction qu'en traitant les "représentations collectives" comme des systèmes de signes on

pouvait espérer sortir de la dénonciation pieuse et rendre compte en détail de la mystification qui transforme la nature petite-bourgeoise en nature universelle.⁷²
(Barthes 1970:76)

As I mentioned in the introduction, the greatest immediate applications of these two disciplines in film theory – structuralism and film semiotics – came in relation to genre films, and their objective was to expose a then complex and hermetic system by means of a symptomatic reading of American culture through a study of the elements and rules structuring its cinema-reality.

Language in Saussurian terms does not reflect reality as the linguistic sign, he would argue, and was not a term that could be attached to an object but rather to a combination of signifier and signified. As a signifying system, language arbitrates reality and therefore has an ideological function. “Le mythe est une parole”, Barthes would add, linked to a communication system and to a certain society at a specific given time (as the above quote shows). Both structuralism and semiotics derive from structural linguistics, a master discipline which in the sixties tried to establish the communicative power of language from its smallest elements to their meaningful combinations. But linguistics, seen as the science whose object of studies is the structures of the language (*langue*), is no longer sufficient, and it is here that semiotics arrives at a crucial point, especially in its structuralist formation, says Saussure:

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek semeion “sign”). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. (in Wollen 1972:116)

Saussure uses the word “semiology” as opposed to “semiotic” (without the “s”) used by Peirce. Both semioticians and semiologists have long debated this term and its definition. For the former, of mainly Anglo-Saxon origin, semiology is understood as the science of signs created by human beings and therefore not so encompassing as semiotics. For the latter, from Romance countries, semiotics is a system of signs with hierarchical

⁷² There are here two main determinants: on the one hand, an ideological criticism based on the so-called language of mass culture; on the other hand, a first semiologic deconstruction of this language: having read Saussure, I came to the conclusion that on dealing with “collective representations” as sign systems, one could move away from the pious denunciation and present in detail the mystification which transforms the petty bourgeoisie into a universal nature. (*my translation*)

structures similar to language (like a road code, art, music and literature); whereas semiology is the general theory, the metalanguage⁷³ dealing with all common semiotic aspects. These dual origins have long been studied by theorists (some, like Julia Kristeva, would argue that “semiotics” studies the signifier) but, over time, both terms have been applied in an alternate manner, although more recently the term “semiotics” is more extensively employed and seems to be replacing the more static term of “semiology”.

Although Saussure had identified the way to express the combination between the two elements of S/s (capital “S” for signifier and lower case “s” for signified)⁷⁴ and the relationship that exists between signs in these two planes, it was Barthes who more fully set about an analysis of the rapidly developing forms of contemporary popular culture, as seen above, and the way signs operate in culture. He worked most exclusively on a semiological system, that of *langue*, and identified two orders of signification: denotation and connotation. The linguistic sign (the word) is hence imbued in the signification, as he stresses in his *Mythologies*: “Le mot est ici d’autant mieux justifié, que le mythe a justement une double fonction: il désigne et il notifie, il fait comprendre et il impose” (Barthes 1970:202).⁷⁵ Barthes explains in his book the way the photograph of a young black African in French uniform conceals a hidden meaning, clearly stressing the idea of signification and myth in the visual media in the light of the work of linguists, such as Saussure and the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev. Here is the cover of the magazine followed by his remarks:

⁷³ When the term “metalanguage” was first coined by the logicians of the School of Vienna (Rudolph Carnap (1891-1970) being its major contributor), a certain controversy was installed. All in all, Carnap wanted to show that the language we use to speak can also speak of itself.

⁷⁴ Interestingly, Jacques Lacan himself was very keen on Saussure’s theories and wanted to demonstrate the primacy of the signifier in the psyche by placing the capitalised Signifier above a lower case and italicising the signified (S/s) so as to prove that they both interrelate.

⁷⁵ “The word is better justified, the myth has precisely two functions: it designates and it notifies, it makes it clear and it imposes” (*my translation*).



I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (a black soldier is giving the French salute); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier (...). In myth (and this is the chief peculiarity of the latter), the signifier is already formed by the signs of the language (...). (in Storey 2006:93)

Apart from the two orders of signification (denotation / connotation), Barthes insinuates that the two produce a third one, that of ideology. So now one can not only differentiate between a first layer of meaning, the literal one, but also a second one on which the sign works, bringing in a connotative meaning. That third element theorised by Barthes emphasises the ideological dimension which is at the heart of the myth and which makes us understand our own culture and therefore supports a cultural meaning.

The example of the *Paris-Match* magazine illustrates this argument. Many others could be given, especially at the level of cinema. Let us take the photograph of Marilyn Monroe in her role of Peggy in *Clash by Night*, a *noir* film directed by Fritz Lang in 1952.

When looking at her picture, we see the sign at a denotative level, in the first order of meaning, with a definitional or obvious meaning, which uses both the signifier and the signified. Her name in the film, as well as her early career, conjures up her many qualities as an individual star, such as her elegance, sex-appeal and irreverence, all of which are associated at a connotative level. The image below was taken for a publicity still to be used in *Clash by Night* (fig. 63), and here clearly the process of connotation operates at the second order of signification which uses the initial signifier and signified affixing an additional signified.

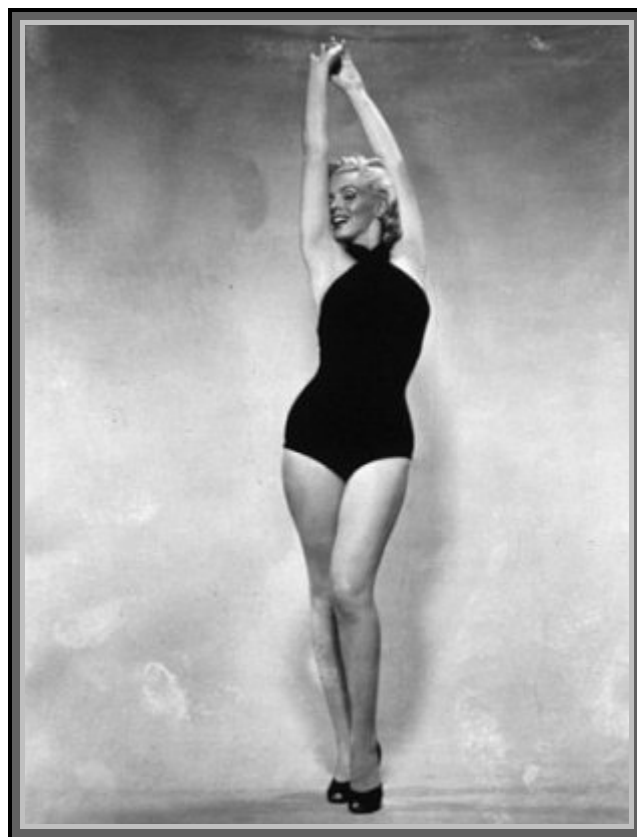


Figure 63. Marilyn Monroe

Sausurre also states that signs can be interpreted at the mythic level. In this case, for example, the name of Hollywood implies the dream factory of stars. It can also evoke cynicism, manipulation and duplicity, clearly expressed, for instance, in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* with Gloria Swanson in the role of a psychotic actress. The film is self-referential in that it critiques the dark aspects of Hollywood's star system and the way the machine produces profit and predictability. Associated with a particular culture within a

certain community, our subjective responses trigger a second order of signification, but this time linked to what the theorists refer to as “intersubjectivity”, which is culturally determined, and therefore deriving from a given ideology.

The image of Marilyn Monroe can also be understood as an icon of overdosing on sedative drugs or her phase of depression, and therefore our understanding of that picture and our reading or interpretation of it is now formed at the ideological level. Metz affirms that all these elements and levels of order constitute and reproduce a stronger perception of our cultural belonging and certainly stress our national identity, “the cinematic institution (...) is also the mental machinery – another industry – which spectators “accustomed to the cinema” have internalised historically” (Metz 1982:7).

It is also for this reason that semiotics in film theory became interwoven with other strands, namely theories of ideology and of subjectivity, or Marxism and psychoanalysis (as described in Part *II*). The filmic text gained a new dimension and all of these areas of studies addressed the issue of the spectator and his/her role in meaning-production. Seen as an ideological operation, rather than being a reflection of reality, film was now understood as a form of language and a kind of preferred positioning offered to the subject.

Saussure came up with his theory of the sign, presenting itself as a self-contained dyad: the sign, he argues, can be a representamen, that is, the form the sign takes (and which is not necessarily material); or an interpretant, that is to say, the “mental effect” or the sense made of the sign. Many other followers of this model, such as Umberto Eco or Hjelmslev, substituted the term “sign” for “sign function”, establishing therefore the relationship between an expression (or a material occurrence) and its content. Here it is also relevant to state that the interpretant does not refer to the person or the interpreter, but to the sign. Charles Peirce also formulated his own taxonomy regarding Saussure’s dyad. His model, in fact, brings a new dimension, offering thus a triadic model: including the object – for which the sign stands or to which the sign refers. Thus, he concludes that:

A sign [in the form of a representamen] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (Peirce 1998:228)

This triad of entities constitutes for Peirce the process of semiosis, or the production of meaning, which, in my opinion, becomes clearer by adding this component of what the sign stands for. Illustratively, he states, the traffic light sign for “stop” is composed of a representamen (the red light), the object (the car stopping) and the interpretant (the idea conjured by the red light indicating a vehicle must halt). In such a case, one could perhaps associate the quality of the interpretant to that of the signified. However, Peirce noted too that the interpretant is itself a sign in the mind of the interpreter, or, as he also called it, “the interpretant of the first sign”.⁷⁶ To that degree, Eco is also aware that this “unlimited semiosis”, as he calls it, can mean an infinite series of consecutive interpretants, showing and stressing that after all any first interpretation may be re-interpreted.

For the purpose of this thesis, it is my intention to focus on Peirce’s second major contribution to semiotics: his tripartite classification of the kinds of signs accessible to human consciousness. Note that in the subsequent account, I have continued to employ the Saussurian terms “signifier” and “signified”. Peirce defined the “iconic sign” as “a sign determined by its dynamic object by virtue of its own internal nature”; or, in Saussurean terms, “a mode in which the signifier is perceived as *resembling* or imitating the signified” (Chandler 2007:36). Hence the portrait of an orange resembles what it stands for, the fruit it represents. As the relation between the sign and interpretant is mainly one of resemblance, it is applicable for cases like the portrait of the orange, for example, but also for statues or diagrams, onomatopoeia or sounds of a soundtrack in a dubbed film. Peirce then defined the “indexical sign” as a “sign determined by its Dynamic object by virtue of being in a real relation to it” (in Stam 1992:5). An indexical sign implies an association between the sign and the interpretant, like a cause-effect relationship, as for example, the smoke usually indicating fire. Here the signifier is not arbitrary but rather directly connected to the signified (another example, a pain in the chest can indicate heartburn or other medical anomalies).

It has to be noted that in such cases these relationships and connections may be easily observable or simply inferred, depending on whether the link is a physical one or simply based upon other “signals” such as a medical symptom or a knock on the door. Finally, “the symbolic sign involves an entirely conventional link between sign and

⁷⁶ This idea reinforces the post-structuralist vision of “infinite semiosis” or Eco’s “unlimited semiosis”. It basically underlines the process by which signs refer only to other signs (this is so because his system shows that the conversion of sign to interpretant occurs not within the mind but within the sign system itself).

interpretant” (Stam 1992:6). Here the signifier is not similar to the signified, as is the case, Stam notes, in most of the words forming part of natural languages, but it is merely conventional and primarily arbitrary, like for instance, national flags, or traffic lights, or any other linguistic sign representing objects only by linguistic convention (words, punctuation marks, alphabetical letters, etc).

Whether this list is in the correct order of conventionality might not be relevant as, regardless of their (iconic) form, signs tend to change based upon their relative conventionality and, effectively, they do not exclude one another. From the example above of the photograph Barthes saw in the *Paris-Match* magazine, the iconic sign exhibits the person (the young soldier); in truth, the person pictured resembles the actual person in the picture. Meanwhile, the iconic sign can also deploy an indexical or symbolic dimension, creating thus a new signifier, that of French imperialism, for example. In this high degree of complexity, one must assume a certain relativity, understanding that in this constant movement between the three levels (iconic, symbolic, indexical) the sign gains life. Saussure also explains the manner and the level to which the signified determines the signifier, according to a certain degree of “motivation”. In fact, the higher the sign is “motivated”, the less learning of a fixed convention is necessary and vice-versa.

It is due to the extreme iconic nature of photography and ultimately film that one needs to resist the natural mimesis of film, or as Bazin would say, the “ontological link between a pro-filmic event and the photographic representation” (in Stam 1992:6). The terms “denotation” and “connotation” seem to make their appearance again when introducing these notions of literal representation and its hidden symbolic meaning. The fact that an iconic sign is normally more variable in the sense that it requires associative meanings and is strongly dependent on the intervention of codes clearly means that the cinematic image we watch on the screen, for instance, is never the real itself, no matter how firmly it relies on the iconic and indexical method. Photographs and films are hence built on conventions which require the learning of the codes and the subjacent idea that the cinematic image must be thought of as a signifier that stands for something which is not present. John Fiske also notes that:

the way we watch television and the way we perceive reality are fundamentally similar, in that both are determined by conventions or codes. Reality is itself a complex system of signs interpreted by members of the culture in exactly the same way as are films and television programmes. Perception of this reality is always

mediated through the codes with which our culture organizes it, categorizes its significant elements or semes into paradigms, and relates them significantly into syntagms. (Fiske & Hartley 2003:47)

In this context, Fiske seems to emphasise (albeit indirectly) that film uses all three forms mentioned above: icon (related to sound and image), symbol (oral and writing) and index (of the effect of what is filmed). Moreover, signs are not meaningful isolatedly and thus “conventions or codes” are all important to make it possible for the signs to be interpreted in relation to each other. Our perception of the everyday world, Fiske declares, involves these codes which are truly determined by one’s culture, but I would also add human perception of the world is itself constructed, rather than being simply given. At this point, what we watch on the screen is always a reproduction or a “re-presentation” of the real, and, as Nichols notes, “perception depends on coding the world into iconic signs that can re-present it within our mind. The force of the apparent identity is enormous, however. We think that it is the world itself we see in our “mind’s eye”, rather than a coded picture of it” (Nichols 1981:11). I would distinguish here the terms “code” or “coding” or even “coded picture”, as Nichols mentions, as these are not simply “conventions” but rather sets of connected conventions, which can help with the correlation of signifiers and signifieds.

In the quotation above, Fiske also refers to the two fundamental types of relationship that signs enter, also according to Saussure: paradigmatic (Saussure actually used the word “associative”) and syntagmatic. The first consists of a virtual set of units and they normally concern substitution, as in degrees of comparability or the alphabet and the way the letters are combined with one another to form words. The second, the syntagmatic relationships, relate to positioning or the “horizontal” arrangement into a signifying whole. From a structuralist semiotic point of view these two dimensions (which are often called “axes”, where the horizontal axis is the syntagmatic and the vertical axis is the paradigmatic) are a key distinction as they determine the value of the sign in its combination and differentiation of relations.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ “In the case of film, our interpretation of an individual shot depends on both paradigmatic analysis (comparing it, not necessarily consciously, with the use of alternative kinds of shot) and syntagmatic analysis (comparing it with preceding and following shots). The same shot used within another sequence of shots could have quite a different preferred reading. Actually, filmic syntagms are not confined to such temporal syntagms (which are manifested in montage / the sequencing of shots) but include the spatial syntagms found also in still photography (in *mise-en-scène* / the composition of individual frames)” (Chandler 2007:86).

The notion of “text” as a discourse should also be taken into account here when talking about these concepts of codes and subcodes as they all reflect certain values and beliefs or even attitudes and assumptions. The use of codes is essential in any organised society to guarantee that we all understand the meaning of texts and to help us towards a “preferred reading”, as Daniel Chandler calls it (see previous footnote) and away from what Umberto Eco calls “aberrant decoding”. I also mention these codes, namely the textual ones, because they do not necessarily determine what films really mean, in a film-language context. Moreover, this particular idea will prove beneficial for my discussion of *film noir* and genre, considering that most fundamental kinds of textual codes relate to genre. In fact, particular conventions of content and form are normally regarded as being part of a genre, and it is that point that I wish to argue as being problematic since genres overlap, and often texts, in the broad sense of the term, do exhibit the conventions of more than one genre.

While the analogy between language and film was developed by the Russian Formalists, it was indeed with the advent of structuralism and semiotics in the sixties that the film-language concept was explored by theorists such as the ones mentioned already, Umberto Eco and Christian Metz. As seen earlier, the initial tendency was to contrast the arbitrary signs of natural language with the motivated, iconic signs of the cinema. This category of “analogy” was soon adapted by Metz, giving more room to the simple notion of “motivation” in the relation between signifier and signified. Indeed, his major concern was to shift his categories from those of discourse theory to those of rhetorical and especially psychoanalytic theory.

In his *Language and Cinema* (1974), he suggests that this analogy is more in terms of our everyday perception and experience in parallel with our cinematic experience. In other words, Metz was declaring that the arbitrary sign of linguistics is different in the context of cinema. I presume the semiotician here wishes to express the notion that the relation might be arbitrary in some cases, but motivated in others. This is obviously not a problem judging from the fact that film installs a different relationship between signifier and signified or between shots and words, that is, language and cinema, add an important difference since film may not be as much coded as a *langue*. One can speak a language and produce full utterances as long as one is familiar with a particular language code; in cinema, we can actually invent and “speak” a certain cinematic language. A *noirish* film

such as *Citizen Kane*, for instance, represents a whole new cinematic language in which Welles extended the filmmaking techniques to the extreme and ended up creating a rather unique film aesthetic, whereas most other natural languages are not so open to initiative and creativity.

In *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (1974) Metz (whose purpose, as he himself defined it, was to “get to the bottom of the linguistic metaphor”) refers to cinesemiotics as a discipline that has learnt much from the linguistic models of Ferdinand de Saussure, but declines, however, a theoretical model for film based on verbal language. According to him, a shot is not like a word which already exists in a dictionary, and neither can it be divided or reduced into smaller units like the word which is a purely virtual lexical unit that is more or less organised in a semantic field. For that matter, he tried to compare shots and words (which illustrates his strong links to linguistic semiotics) and he states that “the image discourse is an open system, and it is not easily codified, with its non-discrete basic units (the images), its intelligibility (which is too natural) its lack of distance between the significate and the signifier” (Metz 1974:86). I would argue here that at the core of the medium the meaning in film comes mostly through conventions which began as figures, and which for Metz, are normal marks of an irrational discourse which becomes gradually ordered. He conceives film operating semiotically (through grammar and syntax and the already mentioned invariant relation of signifier to signified); rhetorically, with figures getting involved with the signified, and thus destabilising its relation with the signifier; and psychoanalytically, with the forces and processes being articulated with the dream work (basically what Freud referred to as rhetorical figures – antithesis, parallelism, reversal, etc).

In practice this meant supplementing categories of semiotics (codes) and a new dimension in the discourse theory (syntagms, paradigms, aspects of narration). Like rhetoric, this discipline of looking into cinema through an examination of cultural facts and through tropes of metaphor and metonymy added a new vision of the structure of cinema. Henceforth the study of figures, rather than codes, must be dominant in an assessment of cultural artifacts. In relation to film this is even more suitable, especially when analysing film genres as a collection of strategies rather than a well-ordered system.

Psychoanalysis was another theory within this figural process of condensation and displacement coming from Freud (regarding the unconscious and disordering). One can

only agree that these disciplines share a similar method of organising a text combining elements, selecting them and placing them in a certain structurally organised way following a legitimate linguistic system. In cinema, the rules seem to be applied with a specific concern for selecting and ordering images and ordering makes up the very processes of language (dictionary and grammar).

To summarise this point, the shift from how Christian Metz sees film has indeed reversed our conventional order in handling cinematic meaning. From a psychological perspective (in which signifiers organise themselves and respond to dynamic processes associated with the dream work presented by Freud) and a rhetorical point of view (the domain of signified being replaced by figures, unbalancing the relationship between signified and its signifier), Metz feels that film operates essentially from a semiotic realm. Therefore, metonymy becomes the paramount figure as it establishes the association by which one is able to move from one aspect or image to a related one in search of a satisfying final picture. When this process is complete, elaborated in a logical (that is, semiotic) way, a filmed narrative is then achieved.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, combining his phenomenological description with “hermeneutic interpretation”, opposes this method of analysis through separation by dealing with the figural process dialectically. Metaphor, he claims, stands above all figures (“metaphor has the extraordinary power of redescribing reality”), and adds “the impossibility of reaching a social reality prior to symbolization” (Ricoeur 1981:237). Perhaps we can now see why Ricoeur privileges metaphor above all figures while Metz relegates it to a special form of association.

This issue is posed quite interestingly in the collection of essays mentioned above entitled *Le Signifiant Imaginaire* (1977), in which Metz attempts to state that the division line that between the orders of discourse and of figuration simply averts any likely link with semiotics and psychoanalysis. The point I am trying to make here is that in a film category such as the one discussed in this thesis, one can easily understand that film images in *film noir* trace not only the inner speech in the visual, that is, located under the sign of the ego, but at the same time they create a broader range of expectations that filter how a spectator reads any scene through its assembled physical characteristics.

This film category might be, therefore, just as heavily coded and stereotyped as any other in the cinema movement (like the Western films), and might mistakenly lead us to

believe in it as a film genre, it seems to me. In genre study, it is the figurative markers in the texts that respond over the years in varying historical contexts that give rise to a certain film designation, as I will explain in Part V. In *film noir* my interpretation derives identical expectations in terms of both narrative content and style, and therefore aims rather for visual tropes and visual analysis.

The next pages attempt then to provide a semiotic analysis of some *noir* productions, bearing in mind what Jean Mitry identified as the three stages in the film viewing process: perception (representation); organisation (narrative); and valuation (rhetoric). Because each of these stages is constructed by means of a different set of signs, they each demand a different operation from the viewer. Cinematic representation (the image itself), as Metz conceives it, is used “to synchronise” both the visual and the verbal elements. Our sense of the perceptual field can, however, be questioned by the combination of the elements of the sign (focus, colour, depth, camera stability, etc). Once the spectator possesses this adequate model he or she relates it appropriately and decodes the visual images: “Cinema is (...) an artistic language, a discourse or signifying practice characterised by specific *codifications* and ordering procedures” (Stam 2000:111). It is up to the spectator, thus, to establish the kind of rapport with the semantic field that potentially enables the viewer to work out the meaning of, for instance, the metaphor’s power.

Therefore, the perceptual elements of the sign (from depth of field and camera movements to the symbols and colour patterns) will be approached and aligned with the conventions of genre, seeking the appropriate level of discourse. In short, since semiotics and structuralism taught us to study the system through which signs are recognised as images and stories, I will focus on the instances when a sign is not assimilated by the narrative and where consequently a misrecognition occurs; or, as Charles Sanders Peirce put it (see introduction note at the beginning of this chapter), “a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning”, and hence I will give my view on what these signs substitute for in the four film productions under consideration.

2 The Universe of Motifs and Symbols in *Film Noir*

As I mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this subsection of Part IV is to search for the distinctive patterns that bear out my argument that visual motifs determine the meaning and the power of *film noir*. In the chapter on semiotics, I explained that the visual content associated with *film noir* is not exactly equivalent to the conventions of language, and I have also stressed that a specific image may or may not participate in the generation of specialised meaning. One could obviously argue that this affirmation holds true for every type of film. Yet, it is at the level of association(s) that *film noir* gains its significance, demonstrating that there is still a certain coherence that exists in this type of films: the dark streets become a symbol of alienation; the character's inexorable gaze becomes obsessive; the whole atmosphere becomes deterministic and confused.

My selection of the four *noir* productions that follow illustrates the unorthodox decisions made by their directors, working within the studio system, and how they were always open to the unexpected and the inspiration of the moment. Whether in control of every detail or delegating to their teams, Lang, Siodmak, Tourneur, and Lewis managed to produce work that is both personally distinctive and a characteristic of a style. Their contribution to the world of *noir* is reflected in their camerawork, with tight framing, which is so typical of *noir*. Compositional elements, such as asymmetry, angularity or verticality are all convergent features that recreate the fractured image of *film noir*, mirroring the protagonists' disintegration.

I will start with Fritz Lang, the best known of the émigrés from German Expressionism. His vast range of films in the *noir* domain reflects the tensions and insecurities of his time, and certainly counterbalances the optimism of Hollywood's musicals and comedies. His films show an immediate difference in tone and attitude in respect of characterisation, and the one to be analysed next (*Scarlet Street*) is suffused with a bleak psychological outlook. Perhaps for all these reasons, Lang was rightly dubbed the "Master of Darkness", emphasising his singular and iconic contribution to *film noir*.

2.1 Fritz Lang

Out of the list of directors selected in this part, the name of Fritz Lang (Vienna, Austria, Dec. 5, 1890 – Aug. 2, 1976) is the one that stands out in terms of the number of significant *noir* films created and which became acclaimed subsequently. Growing up in *fin de siècle* Vienna, Lang attended art school before WWI, and soon absorbed part of the opulent decadence of major painters of the early twentieth century, namely Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, and Edvard Munch. Moreover, the concepts in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, specifically his amoral *Übermensch* and the unconscious drives, and the mordant theories of Sigmund Freud were to be reflected in Lang's work for decades to come. However, it was during WWI that Lang decided to join the German film industry.

“Der müde Tod” (*Weary Death*, 1921), not only inspired Douglas Fairbanks Sr.'s 1924 feature, *The Thief of Baghdad*, but is also considered as a major cinematic achievement by Lang, thanks to its special effects. The following year, Lang directed *Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler* (*The Gambler*), an epic divided into two parts and which portrays the life of a doctor of psychology and a master criminal. In 1924, *Die Nibelungen* was also a silent fantasy film divided into two different parts, *Siegfried* and *Kriemhild's Revenge*, based upon the 13th-century Siegfried epic poem, and intended to reinstate German cultural heritage.

In 1927, Fritz Lang directed a science-fiction film which, still nowadays, remains a classic and is shown in several film festivals. *Metropolis* is a dominant Expressionistic drama about a futuristic urban society, and along with its amazing technical achievement, it became one of the most expensive silent production ever made (it almost bankrupted the UFA studio). Lang decided then to come up with his own production company for his next movie, *Spione* (1928), which, though not so successful as his previous movies, also tackles the sophisticated world of espionage and technology. It was followed by *Woman in the Moon* (*Die Frau im Mond*, 1929), another science fiction silent film, and *M* (1931), starring Peter Lorre as a compulsive child-murderer. *M* (see p.108) is Lang's first sound film and is considered by the director himself his finest masterpiece of his German period.

Andrew Sarris once wrote that “If Adolf Hitler had never existed, Fritz Lang would have had to invent him on the screen”. Sarris refers to the fact that Lang was not Jewish and that his 1932 film *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse* would intentionally reflect Nazi teachings. This explains the reason why Lang was called upon by Joseph Goebbels, the then head of the Ministry of Enlightenment and Propaganda, to administer Nazi film production. Lang was not, however, willing to accept this suggestion and decided to leave Germany for Paris that same day. In 1933, his wife and screenwriter collaborator Thea von Harbou divorced him, and joined the Nazi movement. Once in Paris, Lang released a French fantasy film called *Liliom*, starring Charles Boyer and Madeleine Ozeray, in 1934, and signed a contract with David O. Selznick of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. This was when he decided to move to Hollywood where he eventually stayed for over twenty years, working on and directing films of diverse genres (thrillers, war and crime dramas, and Westerns).

In 1963 Lang appeared himself in the film *Le Mépris* by Jean-Luc Godard, released in the United States as *Contempt*. The film follows the tradition of Brechtian deconstruction, as it is a film about filmmaking, and always reminding the spectator of its artificial and manufactured design. Starring *noir* actor Jack Palance, in the role of a vulgar American producer called Jeremy Prokosch, Fritz Lang plays himself as a director of a film remake of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, which Prokosch wants to make more commercial. With *Le Mépris*,⁷⁸ also starring Michel Piccoli and Brigitte Bardot, Lang was awarded the title of French *Officier* by the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. He died in Beverly Hills, California on August 2, 1976, at the age of 85.

The above examples from Lang’s career are relevant as they show how Lang explored his personal fascination through cinema, using, as he states, “cruelty, fear, horror and death”. Still today, his filmmaking style is essentially admired for the arresting visual compositions and sound effects, all imbued with suspense and the use of minimalist techniques to stir up horror in the spectator’s mind. His *oeuvre* in the world of *noir* is particularly vast, always showing the dark side of human nature (some examples of his films are depicted in fig. 64), with protagonists left at the mercy of the laws of fate. Patrick McGilligan, in his Lang biography, also registers the director’s visions of the world of human moral corruption:

⁷⁸ The film was considered by Colin MacCabe in the magazine *Sight & Sound* as “the greatest work of art produced in postwar Europe” (quoted from an article by Phillip Lopate entitled “Brilliance and Bardot, All in One,” in *New York Times*, June 1997).

Irony of ironies, the man with the monocle was virtually blind. He was one of the cinema's greatest visionaries, this director who conjured a mythic world in *Die Nibelungen* and created a fantastical future in *Metropolis*. His Dr. Mabuse was the emblematic madman of Hitler's Germany. In *M* he explored the depths of human depravity. After rejecting a Faustian pact with Joseph Goebbels – if it really happened that way – he came to Hollywood, where he found a second life exploring the depths of America, and his own inner demons, in masterly films like *Fury*, *You Only Live Once*, *The Woman in the Window*, *Scarlet Street*, and *The Big Heat*. (McGilligan 1997:73)

The films mentioned in the quote above are indeed some of the major works from Lang's filmography, and, as the author stresses, Lang aimed at "exploring the depths of America, and his own inner demons". They also have features that strongly herald the *noir* movement and which provide essential visual and thematic links between the German Expressionism of the previous decade and American *film noir* which lay ahead. Some of the picture insets below were taken from these movies and show Lang's fateful visual style and the alienation of his characters.



Figure 64. Different scenes from various films by Fritz Lang⁷⁹

Due to Lang's extensive *noir* filmography, I will focus only on two *noir* productions that serve as an evidential basis for this dissertation regarding the world of entrapment that characterises *noir*, Lang's psychology of human weakness and his regular recapitulations of the themes of crime and punishment. Through them, I also wish to emphasise how his career constitutes a complete change in filmmaking and direction in the history of cinema. The fact that he moved from one studio to another (at least seven different ones) throughout his career shows the extent to which Lang was eager to experiment new styles until when he managed to form his own production company. All in all, Fritz Lang's distinctive style remains very personal and subtle and not necessarily aimed at mass audiences. Although films like *Metropolis*, for example, may be an

⁷⁹ Sequence of films (from left to right): *M* (1931), *Fury* (1936), *You Only Live Once* (1937), *The Big Heat* (1953).

exception to this rule, his movies stand out from the norm for their visual and thematical point of view. More importantly, Lang's Hollywood pictures, specifically the one I am about to discuss, convey an image of the darkness of human complexity and the corruption of the soul.

Although he obtained acclaimed success with films such as *The Big Heat*, Lang felt that too much (studio) control was placed over his American productions. While recollecting his past cinematic experiences in his early German years, Fritz Lang admitted that every low-budget film (aimed at attracting audiences) he had directed had been an attempt for him to get back the type of studio power that had allowed him to work unrestrained. Due to matters of censorship and politics in film production, Lang was often held back and felt limited in terms of the content and style of his own films. Yet, Fritz Lang managed to appropriate sufficient authorial control of his movies (this is in part one of the reasons why Lang was so highly acknowledged by the critics who created the *auteur* theory), even when the Hays Code directly interfered with his vision. Fritz Lang notes: "Every picture has a certain rhythm which only one man can give it. That man is the director. He has to be like the captain of a ship" (in Grant 2003:145). Perhaps therefore the high admiration that we have for Fritz Lang today is largely a result of this ability. Even in his later films, Lang's talent to twist the cinematic blade in human despair made even his not-so-well achieved productions (mostly those from the sixties) multifaceted and inspiring in their representation of dark and disturbed psychology. By 1945, fully established in Hollywood, Fritz Lang directed two much-admired *noir* movies - *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* – which share many visual and plot features as I will discuss next.

2.1.1 *Scarlet Street* (1945) and Rejecting the Mundane



Directed by Fritz Lang

Produced by Fritz Lang

Written by Dudley Nichols; from the novel and play *La Chienne* by Georges de la Fouchardière in collaboration with Mouezy-Eon

Starring Edward G. Robinson, Joan Bennett, Dan Duryea, Jess Barker, Margaret Lindsay

Photography by Milton Krasner

Music Score by Hans J. Salter

Costume Design by Travis Banton

Film Editing by Arthur Hilton

Scarlet Street was the debut of Diana Productions, the semi-independent production company Lang founded in 1945 with actress Joan Bennett (who participates in this movie) and her husband, Walter Wanger. Initially, the objective of Wanger, Lang and Bennett in establishing Diana Productions was to find a way of dealing with the numerous changes American cinema was going through. However, Fritz Lang soon realised that semi-

independent production companies in the forties could not significantly change the way films were made and they certainly did not enhance his power with the major studios. Joan Bennett made three *noir* films for Fritz Lang,⁸⁰ however just after *Secret Beyond the Door* (1948) - a psychological and melodramatic suspense tale and an updating of Ulmer's *Bluebeard* of 1944 (see p. 334) – Bennett was to quit Diana Productions.

Scarlet Street was based on Jean Renoir's *La Chienne* and it shares its bleakness, though the tone and the way the characters react to each other, under the pressure of corrupting forces, give the American film a very different emphasis. Moreover, it is the way that it involves the audience in emotionally strange and improbable ways that makes it stand out. The film starts in a very simple manner but gradually piles on conflicting emotions, one after another, to the point that the spectator needs to step back, only to find him or herself in a weak position to judge. Evaluating right from wrong or the main character's actions and attitudes in the film may seem undemanding, yet there comes a time in the movie that we understand that the right things are done for the wrong reasons and vice versa. Or that acts committed out of stupidity are sometimes worse than acts of cruelty, suggesting that an innocent person may be punished for a crime he did not commit and yet we feel he deserves the punishment anyway. This harsh morality tale presents us with a world where irony takes on its darkest tinge and underlines the pathos of the main male character of the film.

Christopher Cross, played by Edward G. Robinson, is depicted as a lonely man, tied to an unremittingly shrewish wife and an incredibly monotonous job as a bank cashier. At first, he seems a good-natured man resigned to an everyday life which is as dreary as can be and this is made visible by the way Cross interacts submissively both at work with his boss and at home with his wife Adele (Rosalind Ivan). Nonetheless, the viewer begins with a fellow-feeling for the main character but ends up having little compassion towards the end of the film, at least as far as his actions are concerned. Soft-spoken, with a fragile demeanour and incapable of distrust, Cross looks wretched at times and ends in a totally deplorable state of distress and misfortune.

⁸⁰ *Scarlet Street*, *Woman in the Window* and *Secret Beyond the Door*.

2.1.1.1 Kitchen Ammunition: Aprons, Ice-picks & Emasculation

At first, Cross seems too blind to see that he is being taken advantage of both by his own colleagues and his boss, J.J. Hogarth (Russell Hicks) and back at home. With his frilly apron hung around his neck, he shows moments of great domestic subjugation (fig. 65).



Figure 65. *Scarlet Street*

From a semiotic point of view, this flowery “noose” works as a perfect signified that traces the descent of a middle-aged man from his safe and stable existence. When putting it on, it is almost as if he is condemning himself, as it not only captures Chris Cross and holds him literally by the neck, but it also works as a kind of a yoke reinforcing his submission and thus his incarceration. The visual tension that is created when the spectator sees Chris wearing his apron or holding a huge carving knife constitutes both his entrapment and the discomforting fear of discovering he might burst out into uncontrollable violence. This scene reminds us of the supermarket scene from *Double Indemnity* (fig. 66) which also works as the private rendezvous place where Neff and Phyllis plan their crime (see p. 144).



Figure 66. *Double Indemnity*

In the case of *Scarlet Street*, there is also an observable crisis of masculinity embodied by Chris. The scenes in which we see him dressed in his apron have this sort of overtone. For example, he shows signs of an extreme physical weariness throughout; and in a psychological manner, a strong desire to cease this agony as if a rope around his neck would put an end to his life but above all to his emotional torment, his enforced meekness and malleability of mind. Following Frank Krutnik's argument that *film noir* underlines the problematic aspects of masculine identity, *Scarlet Street* reinforces *noir*'s emphasis on male characters, specifically Chris Cross, who appears to be incapable of overcoming his Freudian Oedipus complex, and who is, as Krutnik notes, "perhaps evidence of some kind of crisis of confidence within the contemporary regimentation of male-dominated culture" (Krutnik 1991:91). Being a married man, Cross feels sexually compromised and the apron emphasises how much he is sexually caught up and castrated, especially later in the film when he meets Kitty March (Joan Bennett). Finally, it also accentuates that beneath that pathetic-looking apron lies a man waiting, with a self-contained life exposing his misery.

To a great extent, Chris Cross embodies the sharp sense visible in *film noir*, namely the sense of deprivation of power and influence that postwar veteran men felt when they returned home only to realise that women had now occupied the workforce in unparalleled numbers. At the same time, the scene above shows the dual view of masculinity, expressed in the contrast between the timid clerk and the sleazy criminal, Johnny Prince (Dan Duryea).

Film noir, in this regard, has always been perceived as a major confrontation with the determining norms of masculinity in Hollywood productions. In this type of films, we normally see representations of inflated male virility and the fixatedly out of control male desire being transferred onto female protagonists. Yet, in *Scarlet Street*, Chris Cross establishes an inversion of this conventional model of masculinity. A good example of this is when Chris's boss finds out about his intention to embezzle and asks him about his possible reasons in a typically *noirish* way: "Was it a woman, Chris?" In this respect, comparatively, one can find similarities of this derisive attitude in Walter Neff's confession in *Double Indemnity*: "I killed him for money – and a woman". *Scarlet Street* is interpreted by many critics, namely E. Ann Kaplan, as a model of patriarchy which becomes inverted and weak due to a reciprocal cultural decline. The critic notes that Chris himself is an evident indication of this lost patriarchy, adding that Chris's "lack of sufficient masculinity causes the 'trouble' in the narrative, and brings about his destruction" (Kaplan 1998:43).

In conjunction with this kitchen item, there are other decisive symbols that express the first signs of Chris's violent behaviour and his irrationality. One is the huge cleaver he uses when chopping a chunk of red meat he is holding in both his hands while his wife is rebuking him. However, the cunning look in his eyes communicates the opposite this time: his way of getting back his lost virility and arresting his emasculation. For the first time the spectator gets sudden access to Chris's emotions; a surge of anguish which translates into a seething murderous anger. The other symbolic kitchen utensil that is going to be associated with the other side of Chris's personality is the ice-pick, which becomes the fatal weapon in the film both for Kitty (fig. 67) and a signifier for himself since he makes the newspaper headlines as "Ice-pick killer to die in chair tonight".⁸¹

⁸¹ These headlines (and the scene of the film) obviously remind us of the famous murder weapon with which Leon Trotsky was killed back in 1939 (Ramón Mercader, a Mexican NKVD agent, buried a sharp steel ice-pick in Trotsky's skull), and which Lang would have known about. Finally, more recently, one could also



Figure 67. *Scarlet Street*

The symbolism of the ice-pick as lethal weapon contrasts with that of the paintbrush used by the artist to paint Kitty. From a sitting model and object of veneration she becomes the helpless prone victim of the man who used to worship her. The hands of the artist would never touch her physically and yet they were constantly reaching out to touch her through his paintings. These artefacts translate not only his sensibility but at the same time they seem to function as a form of “tactile perception”. Indeed, Chris’s identity as an artist will be viciously stolen from him by Kitty as she signs the paintings with her own name for money, insinuating that by doing so she feels that she is married to him. Cross masochistically agrees with this situation and tacitly acknowledges his castration. Therefore, the final act of murdering her with an ice-pick might be perceived as a banished violation, but also as a way of finally being able, through the stabbings, “to sign” the body of Kitty, who has herself put her own marks on his paintings.

The applications (and implications) of the human hand are strongly evident in this movie, as they are in many others. Below are a set of figures all taken from Fritz Lang’s

mention the phallic feminist revenge item, the ice-pick used by Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) in *Basic Instinct* (1992).

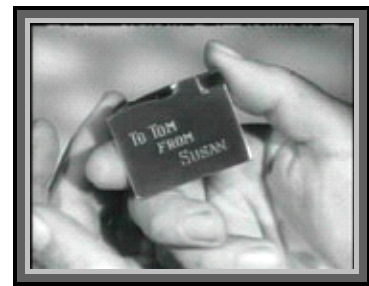
productions and which emphasise the power and the significance of the hand in these films. Figure 68 shows examples from *The Spiders* (1919), the first part of the film released in 1919, which depicts John Terry (Rudolph Lettinger) grabbing hold of the antihero's hand (almost like a fusion of the two hands), revealing the missing finger, and thus identifying him; the second is taken from the film *Metropolis* in which a single hand or a group of hands create a dominant symbol representing personal and mutual struggle; and the third, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956) shows the hands that are holding a shiny cigarette lighter which, like a piece of art that is signed, will eventually unravel the story's mystery.



Figure 68. *The Spiders*



Metropolis



Beyond a Reasonable Doubt

The other set of images (fig. 69) below are scenes taken from the film *M*. If in Lang's films the main characters are often artists (Cross as a frustrated weekend artist, for example), they are also habitually (and frequently simultaneously) hunters or stalkers, as is the case with the letter "M" written in chalk on the palm of the hand of one of the men assaulting Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre). The second inset shows a huge enlargement of



Figure 69. *M*



Beckert's thumbprint as one of the scientists analyses Beckert's personality. This is one of the most distinctive images from Lang, as is the last inset in which we see Beckert looking at his reflection in a mirror, making faces, using his fingers to mould his face into a

contorted Expressionistic grimace, immediately following the previously analysed use of his hand.

In all these films, the hands are an important expressive device, simultaneously part of the body and the source of creativity. In *Scarlet Street* the particular hand that creates notable paintings is at the same time that part of the body which is going to kill. Either as symbolic of erotic touch or of violent gesture, the applications of the hand in Fritz Lang's movies are manifold. In the case of *Scarlet Street*, there seems to be a major concern with the kind of function the hand has in Freudian psychoanalysis, in the sense that Chris's emotional and sexual balance is obtained through the works of his hands as a painting artist.

2.1.1.2 Against the Clock

Scarlet Street opens with a testimonial dinner given in honour of Christopher Cross to celebrate the twenty-five years of loyal dedication to his boss and commitment to his work. This silver jubilee commemoration brings to light the total submission of a man whose work and faithfulness to it are (condescendingly) acknowledged by his co-workers and especially by his boss, J.J. Hogarth. At the end of the dinner, in a room filled with smoke from cigars and cigarettes, Mr Hogarth stands up and says: "Boys, I've had the time of my life tonight. And speaking of time, I have here [he gets a gold chain watch out of his right trouser pocket] a 14-carat jewel timepiece, and that's just right because the man I'm giving it to is a 14-carat jewel cashier". The idea of "faithfulness" is further stressed by the message engraved inside the watch: "To my friend Christopher Cross in token of twenty-five years of faithful service from J.J. Hogarth. 1909-1934." Cross can only thank him and add: "I hardly know what to say (...). All I can say is that we've got the best boss in New York".

The gold watch expresses more than just a powerful metaphor of temporal servitude, underlying Chris's individual psychology. It obviously represents the time ticking away (a quarter of a century), marking the fact that Chris has been trapped in his cashier's cage for far too long. On looking at it, the watch seems to swing back and forth,

almost as if it wants to induce a trance in him, which is what happens to him later. The progressive displacement of cinematic meaning expressed in the symbol stakes out the broader claim of Lang's increasing pessimism. In this particular case, metonymy is used and elaborated in a logical pattern to create the filmed narrative, to show that the watch, the pacemaker of modern life, was indeed given to a (haunted) man, a traveller between two worlds, oscillating between the existential possibilities of recluse with a boring personal and professional life and a (spiritual) sensual life of unattainable pleasure.

Cross enters a hypnosis-like state, showing a change in his feelings and attitudes, in short, a whole set of personality alterations, ultimately leading to hallucinatory and delusional behaviour. Moreover, this strapless (and now personal) timepiece will be carried in his pocket "for the rest of my life", as he smilingly tells his working colleagues, as a premonition that not even time can heal. The clock that hangs in his cashier's cubicle also signifies the conventional, time-bound and scheduled life that his boss demands, and it situates him in a network of narrative developments that determine how much certain forces are out of his control.

The flowery apron and the knife referred to above, the many closed / locked doors depicted throughout the film, the watches and clocks (and their sinister control over Cross's life), the concentric movements Cross makes throughout the film all underline an image of incarceration. If one analyses Lang's films, one can easily understand how his *mise-en-scène* uses watches and clocks as machines with a metaphorical purpose, that of rationalising time and as systems of subjection. In *Metropolis*, for example, the workers of the city, all dressed identically, are small figures that "work" in rhythmic movements, just like machines, that need to operate in a very disciplined way to make sure the whole structure does not collapse. A giant clock face overlays one of these machines in which one of the figures, holding its hands, tries to stop it as a way of stopping "capitalist modernity" and the immoral punitive regulation of society (fig. 70). At the beginning of *M*, again, the children's game shows clock-like images and which in turn reveal the danger that is present for them throughout the film.



Figure 70. *Metropolis*

The clock motif in Weimar films, notably those of Fritz Lang, is often used as a strategy to represent the inevitable danger (especially in the time after the war) of Germany's capitulation to militaristic systems, or, socially speaking, the sick relations between exploiter and exploited classes (the image of such domination being depicted at the conclusion of *Metropolis*). This “cinematic *Angstkomplex* regarding subject-power relations in modern society”, as Munby noted (1999:208), constitutes as much Weimar's legacy to American *film noir* as it contributed to expressionist visions of capitalist urban modernity.

Watches and clocks are also present in many other *noir* films, and their semiological significance – and therefore the relation between signifier and signified – differ from linguistic signs in (at least) two fundamental respects, namely the arbitrary relationship between the signifier (the material) and its mediation with the signified. In *The Big Clock*, for example, the story starts to unwind (as it is told in flashback) when in fact the clock placed in the lobby of the publishing company becomes the focal point and is described as the largest and most sophisticated clock built in the world. Here the iconic sign connotes the personality of media baron Earl Janoth (Charles Laughton): a calculating, excessively egocentric man with diverse obsessions, including clocks. The baron personifies the invisible framework that controls the fate of a man, that of George

Stroud (Ray Milland), who finds himself trapped inside “the big clock” and its grinding gears at its climax.

Indeed, much of the action of the film, as James Naremore notes, is “based on long takes or sequence shots requiring complicated camera movements – as when Ray Milland secretly enters the kitchen door of a luxury apartment, discovers a dead body in the living room, rearranges the evidence, retraces his steps through the kitchen, holds a brief conversation with a man in the hallway, and exits via the elevator” (Naremore 1998:167). The most effective scenes in that film are designed to convey the scattered, luminous lighting of a Manhattan office building during working hours. These stylistic features constitute essential elements in defining *film noir* as a visual iconography, made up of what Geoffrey O’Brien calls “a nexus of fashions in hair, fashions in lighting, fashions in interior decorating, fashions in motivation, fashions in repartee” (O’Brien 1991:45).

In Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* the presence of similar machines, namely trains and clocks, establishes a precise timetable for the whole film. In many *noir* productions trains represent a (false) escape from the *noir* city, and in this film, together with the clocks, the train specifically represents an oppressive force that indicates a reality-bending process. The two parallel train tracks appear to deviate from their mechanical logic, when criss-crossing at a certain time, indicating the coexistence of good and evil that lurks within us all. Guy Haines (Farley Granger), an apparently soft-speaking and good-hearted man, begins a sudden conversation about “criss-cross” murders with Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker) - this is when two men each kill people who are the enemies of the other. Thus, as Robert Stam notes, this “elaborate verbal and visual play on the expressions “criss-cross” and “double-cross” (crossed railroad tracks, crossed legs, crossed tennis racquets, tennis doubles, double scotches, alternating montage as double, (...) and so forth)” (Stam 1992:64) enforces a significant iconic recognition (the codes by which we recognise objects) and iconic designation (the codes by which we name them). As Charles Peirce would declare the fusion of the iconic world with that of the symbolic creates a new dimension. In this particular film, for instance, featuring two *Doppelgänger* characters, Hitchcock draws attention to the articulation of word and image, at times structuring sequences through near linguistic formulations (for example, the cross pattern on the cigarette lighter – fig. 71).



Figure 71. *Strangers on a Train*

The same element (a train) is also particularly resonant in another of Hitchcock's *noir* film, *Shadow of a Doubt*. Shadowy motives underlie all the proceedings, from the double-edged meaning of the title to the train that pulls up from a dark shadow which engulfs Young Charlie (Teresa Wright), as if visually telegraphing what is going to happen. Moreover, the train platform evokes idyllic America, and the smoke coming out from the locomotive gradually anticipates the other side of its nature to reveal a darkness beneath. Other *noir* films analysed so far, like *Double Indemnity* or *Pitfall*, offer a depiction of a harsher underlying reality of post-Depression America amid the stylised dialogue and acting. I wish to return here to the notion of *noir auteurism* described in the previous section. These specific initial scenes function as "an introductory coda sequence" in which we are provided with a literary exegesis of the action as it might appear in the script, and then as a series of shots. This uniqueness of the director's technique privileges the visual image over the written word, and shows characteristic innovation in cinematic stylistics from Hitchcock.

The passing of time is similarly cadenced with other meanings, that of superstition, for example, in *Scarlet Street*. When J.J. Hogarth reaches Christopher and hands him a cigar, Christopher rejects it as he does not smoke but essentially reacts to it being the third

one lit by J.J.'s match. "You're not superstitious, are you, Chris?", to which Cross nods, yet the camera effectively pans down on a single shot (like an insert) and shows him crossing the fingers of his right hand (his hidden, crossed fingers as one of many visual plays on his name), emphasising the strong psychological elements of the unfolding story. For the first time in the film the word "superstitious" is brought forward and the viewer gets to know about Chris's superstition feelings, which foretell his fatal situation and therefore his self-condemnation.

He and his colleagues watch through the window to see their boss stepping out with a young attractive woman – not his wife – and the camera soon focuses on Chris who seems to be wrapped up in a fantasy world. This scene stresses how embarrassed Chris is by the erotic (while all the clerks rush to the window for a glimpse of J.J.'s mistress, he takes a furtive look, and gently withdraws as the younger men start to comment on their boss's sexual activity). Simultaneously, the scene is almost like hindsight, presaging that blind love and desire for a woman who will transform him into a tortured, guilt-ridden murderer. Thus, oneirism⁸² gradually becomes a visual motif, especially later in the film, to reveal the fear and paranoia engulfing the main character. Moreover, the deep focus used in these scenes brings to mind Roland Barthes's system of denotation and connotation. The depth of focus in which the saddened Cross is removed from the main scene (the group of his colleagues) opens up the temporal and spatial dimensions of the shot.

Cross leaves the room with one of his colleagues and decides to walk for a while instead of taking the underground, as he always does, homeward-bound for Brooklyn. His deviation from routine functions as an omen about how much fate and "the web of circumstances" can mean in his life, accentuating this aspect of *noir* sensibility. As it is raining hard, Chris insists upon sheltering his colleague to the bus stop under his already torn little umbrella (again a metaphor of his foredoomed life). "Say, hey, Charlie...you suppose J.J. is running around with that young lady?", asks Chris while standing (ironically) in front of a jewellery store. Charlie (Samuel S. Hinds) just replies: "It looks that way". Then Chris downheartedly, but with aroused interest, adds, stammering again on the first person: "I-I-I wonder what it must be like ... well to be – to be loved by a young girl like that. You know, nobody's ever looked at me like that. Not even when I was young..." Before Charlie hops on his bus, we are told that Chris is a Sunday painter:

⁸² Here I would like to recall the idea of the "oneiric" presented by Borde and Chaumeton (p. 163).

“When I was young I wanted to be a painter. I thought I would be a great painter someday... so I’m a cashier”. This act of self-definition shows Chris’s split. He is a cashier after all: his inscribed watch says so.

This unusual and unintended diversion from his normal routine establishes a strong parallel with another *noir* production by Edgar G. Ulmer, the aptly named *Detour* (see p. 83), starring Tom Neal in the role of Al Roberts, which brings to life a down-on-his-luck nightclub performer who also takes one wrong turn and sees his whole life slowing descending into fear, blackmail and coercion, prodded along by Vera’s (Ann Savage) *femme fatale*. Both films show that departure from routine is a *noir* narrative trope and they both typify the *noir* human condition of the characters as victims of a fate that by nature they can never outrun.

While winding down the streets of Greenwich Village (the home of bohemians and artists), Chris Cross stumbles upon an almost theatrically conceived scene of violence – a young woman (Joan Bennett in the role of Kitty March) being slapped around by a guy, Johnny Prince (played by Dan Duryea) on a street corner – and runs up to them (Enno Patalas refers to this scene as a *tableau vivant*). This street corner can metaphorically express hope and fatalism at the same time: Chris’s lonely life is about to change “just around the corner.” A new dimension of optimism lies there –literally on the ground – the woman who is going to change his life forever, but concurrently there is an air of fatalism (there lies the sex object woman, temptation fulfilled, who will conduct them both to ruin). He beats the young man down with his umbrella which serves as a fighting device and as a shield at the same time. Interestingly enough, his old worn out umbrella, as mentioned above, again symbolically portrays a man who is also just as torn to shreds and perhaps as much in (psychological) distress as the woman he sees being (falsely) attacked.

At *Tiny*’s, they sit down face-to-face, sipping a drink and contentedly listening to “Melancholy Baby”, a song which is often heard on Kitty’s record player (fig. 72). Lang’s treatment of sound reverses to a great extent Jean Renoir’s practice in *La Chienne* and typically relies, as Thomas Leitch notes, on the “triangular notion of intertextuality in which the three sides of the triangle are formed by a literary original, a film translation of that original, and another film that stands in relation to the first two” (Leitch 2002:56). That intertextuality affirms that the music and soundtracks can hold linguistic elements together and that language has an impact on all filmic tracks at least virtually. Just the

instrumental version of “My Melancholy Baby” in *Scarlet Street*, for example, draws out in the viewer the mental presence of the words of that song. Back in Kitty’s apartment we this time listen to the song, and we hear the word “love” over and over, droning, to the point that the needle sticks and the record skips.⁸³ The song is just as desolate and dark as the characters that fill the screen, as it accentuates the fated hopelessness in Chris’s mind, similar to an on-off buzz that triggers in his head all the time, tormenting and punishing him as we shall see.



Figure 72. *Scarlet Street*

The melody becomes fetishistic towards the end of the film as he hears the voice of Kitty calling Johnny. It hammers in his head so much that it soon leads him to hallucinations and a suicide attempt. These particular moments remind the spectator of Dr. Mabuse, in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), when he nears his end or Hans Beckert in *M* when he is captured by the mob of criminals. Both films also directed by Fritz Lang show echoes of the influence of Weimar cinema and *Scarlet Street* suggests the thematic and stylistic stability of his work. Most importantly, German influences manifest

⁸³ This song was originally introduced around 1912 under the title “Melancholy” and was extensively used, namely in the Warner Brothers 1939 gangster movie *The Roaring Twenties* (see footnote on p. 77). The music is by Ernie Burnett and the lyrics by George A. Norton.

themselves in the projection of inner states and emotions, doing so in a *mise-en-scène* that converges on disorienting images and visual distortion and off-centred framed images.

The characters' names also appear to have been chosen very fittingly: the punning name of Christopher Cross and the sex kitten, appropriately named Kitty. Christopher, from the Greek "christos" (the anointed one, Christ) and "phero" (I carry), therefore, "the bearer of Christ". And to emphasise the name even further, "Cross", a cross which will prove too heavy for the character to bear, one that potentially represents his redeeming martyrdom.

During their nightcap conversation, Chris tells Kitty that he likes painting and she assumes that he must be very rich, selling his paintings in Paris, as soon as she hears him saying that he would like to own a Cézanne painting. At no time did Chris find the chance to either affirm or deny anything so when time comes to say goodbye that night, he takes her back to her place, completely enamoured ("Will I see you again?", he asks her ruefully), looking at the white daisy she had given him at the bar. He makes his way back to his place, holding and admiring that flower, representing all her beauty, and symbolising (falsely as it happens) loyal love and innocence.

This section is called "Against the Clock" because I see Chris as a time-piece himself, a carefully crafted precision mechanism, whose limited interiority is both regulated and functional. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the watch is passed down the banquet table to Chris and our first view of him (other than as a dark silhouette from the back) comes as he takes the watch, beaming with delight. Urged to make a speech he stammers over the first person singular, a motif that establishes not only his modesty, but his fundamental ontological insecurity: "well, I – uh – I – I hardly know what to say...". His uncertainty with both the first person pronoun and the verb "to be" during the night he had been offered the gold watch hint that Chris is not truly a mechanical man, but rather is someone with a weak sense of self, someone who has never grown up, and whose "twenty-five years of faithful service" inscribed in his new time-piece represent truly empty or wasted time.

2.1.1.3 Paintings, Portraits, Mirrors: the Noir Triptych

Many *noir* films have recourse to paintings which *per se* draw forth something latent or unexpressed, especially in the sense of idealising a particular woman. As seen before, a good example of this occurs for instance in *Laura* by Otto Preminger. While constructing a mental picture of the dead woman from the suspects he is interviewing, Detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) cannot avoid looking firmly at the obtrusive painting of recently deceased Laura that hangs on her apartment wall (see fig. 60 on p. 245). In *Scarlet Street* Christopher Cross is attached to painting (and especially to the portrait of Kitty he paints later which ironically will be named the “Self-Portrait” – fig. 75) because it symbolises sexual release, and a happier, less compromised life, in other words, a fantasy of escape from the present and its oppressive reality. Just like in *Laura* and *The Woman in the Window*, the paintings of Kitty (both as a flower first and then a portrait of her) express a dream in the form of a work of art, a sliding away from reality into dream fantasy and self-deception.

In the first cycle of *film noir*, painting was used as a repeated trope. A highly significant part of *noirs* have scenes where the *femme fatale* is a framed painting, in, for example, *I Wake Up Screaming*, with Lt Ed Cornell (Laird Cregar) gazing at Vicky (Carole Landis) in his room (fig. 73); *The Woman in the Window*, when psychiatrist Richard Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) meets Alice Reed (Joan Bennett) next to her own portrait (fig. 74); *The Dark Corner* when rich art-collector Hardy Cathcart (Clifton Webb) is obsessed with a woman in a painting, or *The Crimson Kimono* (1959), this time with Christine Downs (Victoria Shaw) playing the role of a Caucasian artist who sketches a portrait of her Asian lover.

The recurrent thematic element of the painted portrait, occurring at the diegetic level of the narrative, has been well described in Raymond Durnat’s seminal article, “Paint it Black: The Family Tree of *Film Noir*”. In his sixth thematic category which he called “Portraits and Doubles”, he notes: “A cycle of grim romantic thrillers focused on women who, dominant even in their absence, stare haughty enigmas at us from their portraits over the fireplace” (Durnat 1970:43). These films oppose the inherent duality of art – it is unclear if the woman in the portrait is an illusion (frequently oneiric) or real. The

woman in the portrait throughout *I Wake Up Screaming*, for example, remains indefinable and inaccessible, adding to the confusion at times, an effect which is after all at the core of *film noir*'s peculiar oneirism. In this context, therefore, Hollywood's fetishising use of certain actresses as iconically alluring – turning them into totems through pictures – is in itself a metonymic process as well.



Figure 73. *I Wake Up Screaming*

Of a divergent nature is the painting of the somewhat podgy man hanging high above the dinner-room. When Charlie pays Chris a visit that Sunday, he stops and stares at the big oval painting and is informed that it is “the late departed” or Chris’s “wife’s former husband”, eye-patched policeman Homer Higgins (Charles Kemper). The look is so intense that he seems to be real, eerie and unsettling at times, as a representative of repressive authority in this household. Even the fact that he has a medal for heroism (he drowned trying to save a suicide) on his coat lapel does not seem to impress Chris much. The conventional “realism” of the painting contrasts sharply with Chris’s own modernist and visionary painting. The glowing vision of lost phallic power dissimulated in the person of Homer’s portrait is revealed on that dining-room wall, and it embodies a patriarchal, masculine authority, whose gaze seems directed mainly at Chris, emphasising his routinised boredom (especially when he dons the abovementioned frilly apron to do household chores). In short, one could say that this portrait on the wall glowers over Chris with an authoritarian and castrating gaze and it represents only the confining conditions of Chris’s domestic life. Moreover, this idea is further highlighted by an insinuating symbol:

the large birdcage. Looming in the foreground of their living-room, it separates husband and wife, and keeps the husband timidly at the edge of the frame, holding in one hand his paint brushes as the mode of escape into the fantasy world of his paintings.



Figure 74. *The Woman in the Window*



Figure 75. *Scarlet Street*

Christopher starts writing Kitty some openly emotional love letters which Johnny, her boyfriend from the street scene described above, discovers. Kitty and Johnny have an abusive relationship: he beats her up and calls her stupid names, like “Lazy Legs” but she does not seem to pay much attention to this; on the contrary, she still sees him as her great lover and her fiancé. Johnny’s fusion of aggression, off-hardness and brusque affection is masochistically accepted by Kitty. She knows that her boyfriend is a sadistic criminal who slaps her around. She at one point complains to her working girlfriend colleague, Millie (Margaret Lindsay): “You wouldn’t know love if it hit you in the face” to which her colleague replies: “If that’s where it hits you – you ought to know.” In turn, Johnny has no problem in pimping her out to Chris Cross in an effort to gain advantage and extort from him all his money: “I expect you to use your brain... Here I am, knockin’ my brains out, tryin’ to raise a little capital, and this is right here in your lap... Date him up!”

Like *La Chienne* (published in the United States as *Poor Sap* by Alfred Knopf in 1930), *Scarlet Street* depicts many crime scenes involving disreputable characters and an antihero that manages to escape from his crime. However, whereas in *La Chienne* the submissive antihero is visibly sleeping with the streetwalker, in *Scarlet Street* this illegitimate affair is presented to us with greater obscurity, as it attempts to finesse a clearly sexual relationship. The Production Code did not have to bar these implied sex

scenes as the attachment is purely one-sided, the result of an obsessive dreamer without the motivation to make a move until the final strike. The French *La Chienne* would certainly not have obtained the approval of Breen Office as the film is much more explicit: Jean Renoir's heroine (Janie Marez as Lucienne Pelletier) is a prostitute in the sordid passageways and narrow streets of Montmartre and she informs Maurice LeGrand (Michel Simon [also a married cashier]) that she lives together with her boyfriend pimp André "Dédé" Gouvain (Georges Flamant). Additionally, a scene like the one in *La Chienne*, in which we see the shocking image of the prostitute's killer kissing her dead body after his crime of passion, would certainly have been banned from the film in America.

At first, we do not know what Johnny needs the money for. He mentions a few thousand dollars he needs to put a down-payment on a garage, but the whole scheme seems to allow him to shoot craps more than anything else. She agrees to be part of the plot as she is "in love; crazy in love" with him and so she meets Chris secretly on a beautiful terrace, sipping some cocktails (fig. 72) while the robins sing. "That robin sings just like I feel", he says to her, enamoured. She disturbs the romantic ambiance by referring to her lack of money to pay the rent; she feels all "bottled-up". Her "embourgeoised version of Renoir's prostitute" (Eisner 1976:258) starts here: taking all his money, while sexually and emotionally double-crossing him. Chris thus goes back to his office and takes the money out of J.J. Hogarth's safe. It only takes him a few seconds to realise that this is not the right thing to do and places the money back where he had found it and decides to go to the bank for a loan, but to no avail.

Back home, Adele carries on demeaning Chris in every way possible. She now wants him to buy a radio so she can listen to one of her favourite soap programmes (ironically called "Happy Households Hour"), scoffing: "The way I have to scrimp and save and you're wasting money on paintings" and looking at the painting of her first husband (whom she is constantly extolling), she adds: "I'd like to know what you'd do without me". We now confirm that the only outlet Chris has is his painting (which his scolding wife will only let him do in the bathroom), a sublimation of his love for Kitty March. He does not feel anything towards Adele, as he once let slip to Kitty: "I just didn't want to be alone." Adele is the kind of harridan who persistently puts her husband down and makes him feel enslaved. She apparently feels the same: "I'd be better off a widow. The only reason why I put up with you is because I'm married to you... I'm stuck."

From the first thirty minutes of the film, Fritz Lang gives the viewer every reason to understand why a decent respectable man suddenly abandons his ideals, starts stealing to maintain his delusional dependence on Kitty, and hits rock bottom at the conclusion of the film. Once again, the parallelism with Renoir's *La Chienne* is obvious. Using repeated imagery of mirrors and reflections⁸⁴ and portraits, Lang visually accentuates the self-entrapping model of duplicity and deceitfulness characteristic to exploitive human relationships.

The countless mirrors that appear, especially inside the apartment, displaying reflections of Kitty, are crucial symbolic elements. They appear throughout the film apparently randomly but are in fact positioned so that the viewer can gradually understand Kitty's two-faced nature.⁸⁵ In part, this leads me to the point of Plato's metaphor (the allegory of the cave) which he used to contrast the common understanding of knowledge, truth, and reality with what seemed an obvious "un-reality", the cinematic projection of images. This powerful symbol in the film manages to expose plainly what is before us, forcing us to interpret and evaluate what we see. Whereas Kitty uses them as a means to emphasise her vanity and superficiality, for us these meta-projections of images within images stand for distortions of the true ugliness of the character. Very often we see Kitty gazing at her own reflections in a Narcissus-like manner enjoying what she sees. Just like the object in the director's viewfinder, the mirrors delimit excerpts from a diversity of pictures either through their outlines or through their frames. Depending on their position (as with the camera), a mirror can tilt these frames or put them at a disturbing angle. Similarly, the camerawork of Fritz Lang provides a *noir mise-en-abyme* story in *The Woman in the Window*, about the virtual dreamlike world and the imprisoned *Id* of a criminal psychology professor, an ordinary middle-aged man, invited by a young, good-looking woman to go to her apartment to see some drawings. The frame below (fig. 76) is chosen to illustrate Alice Reed (Joan Bennett) with a nude female torso ironically being reflected in the mirror behind her, as a symbol of professor Wanley's forbidden desire. I will come back to this issue of mirrors and reflections in my analysis of subsequent films

⁸⁴ A good example of a mirror reflection is the image of despair reflected on a mirrored wardrobe whilst Chris is on his knees in their bedroom rummaging around in search of the insurance money from Adele's first husband's death which she has hidden some place (in a replica scene of Renoir's *Adele* (Magdeleine Bérubet)).

⁸⁵ Or the double-faced nature of Chris Cross for that matter: in the room scene above (fig. 67), Chris's leaning body holding the ice-pick to kill Kitty is ingeniously reflected in the mirror of the wardrobe, emphasising thus the other side of his personality.

(namely *The Spiral Staircase* and *Out of the Past*), but, on the whole, I consider that this film has more mirror shots than any other *noir* production and they certainly stand as Fritz Lang's trademark visual trope, that is, to have one person filmed from two dissimilar perspectives.



Figure 76. *The Woman in the Window*

In *Scarlet Street* Alexander Golitzen (a renowned art director and production designer) recreated Jean Renoir's Montmartre as New York's Greenwich Village, a seedy Bohemia, where Cross bought a loft for Kitty and for him to express his artistic aspirations (and his emotional release). However, the apartment is soon metamorphosed into a place where hideous stratagems are elaborated between Kitty and Johnny, with Chris stuck between them (reinforcing the idea of a triangular relationship). This space will be invaded by ludicrous subterfuges coming from all characters; by love declarations (it is here that we hear Chris telling Kitty "I think of you all the time. All I want is to see you, be near you") the spectator gets the first hints of Chris's Machiavellian plans: "If I had no wife... if something would happen to her that would make me free, would you marry me?"

At his job, Chris pretends to be working later than usual and for the first time we see him embezzling company funds (this time he does not hold back) to pay for his

mistress's luxuries. While putting the money into an envelope, the camera keeps its distance, offering only intermittent moments of clarity through a recurrently high angle, when his boss appears from the top of the stairs, viewed from a low angle, at the cashier window unexpectedly: "I just caught you in time", he says to Chris, who looks terrified at his boss's presence (the low angle of the camera emphasises his towering status) and starts sweating and feeling "caught in the act". These words could not be better directed had J.J. Hogarth known about his employee's intentions, and they certainly carry different meanings here. The most important one is the fact that from the beginning of the film, as I explained in the previous section, Chris has been "caught in time", tangled in the "fate-machine" embodied in his time-piece. However, J.J. does not think that Chris was setting that money aside in an attempt to steal from the main safe. Then the high angle of the camera peers down on Chris - we again see Hogarth at the top level looking down onto Chris who is passively and obediently in his small cubicle, like in a prison cell (with the bars that enclose him) not unlike the imprisoned bird in its cage at his home. This camera angle captures his intimidation visually, showing that Chris is both trapped in his helplessness and judged from on high.

Later Johnny learns that some art critics were enthusiastic about the two paintings he had picked up from the apartment. In a comedy-like scene, Johnny fabricates some foolish story and makes the critics believe that it was actually Kitty who had painted them. They seem flabbergasted as the paintings have such a "masculine force", as one of them says to her: "You're an extraordinary artist... Your work is very strong, Miss March". The scenes that follow stage an avalanche of lies from both Johnny and Kitty. Just as the two art critics leave the apartment, Johnny kisses Kitty to show his exhilaration over his successful scam of publicising Kitty as the famous painter. Immediately after that, we see him slapping her on the face when she says "If I had any sense, I'd walk out on you". This is another scene which establishes the sado-masochistic bond between them: Kitty admits that part of her attraction to Johnny is the physical violence and the abuse. As Patrick McGilligan notes about this triangular relationship:

The Chris Cross character happens to have the same occupation as a brother the director barely acknowledged. All of Chris's joys are furtive: not only does he paint behind closed doors, but like Lang he derives furtive pleasure from *gory* items in the newspaper. Under such oppressive conditions, who could blame a fellow for taking a mistress? (...) But extracurricular sex can lead to entanglements. Kitty, the woman

Chris meets by accident, is a hellcat, no less the bitch of the title they couldn't use. She knows her power over men like Chris, and comes on like a strong perfume or a slug of booze. All the same it is strange she is such a purring fool for Johnny. (McGilligan 1997:326)

In the meantime, the allegedly dead first husband of Cross's wife reappears all of a sudden. He explains he had not drowned, but had stolen money from the woman he theoretically was saving. Already suspected of corruption, he thought he had better to hide away. Taking this chance, Cross understands his marriage will be nullified when he confronts his wife with her "live dead" first husband. Having arranged that, he believes he can then marry Kitty, only to catch her in Johnny's arms when he unexpectedly shows up in the apartment. Johnny finds it difficult to know what to say to justify his presence there, but he manages to sound convincing. For the second time we hear Chris proposing to her, yet she reacts straight away: "But you can't," adding afterwards: "Of course, I'd marry you, if you were free. But you are not..." to which Chris adds: "Something might happen..." At this point, the recurrent idea of something bad happening to his wife reinforces the presentiment that a tragedy will soon overtake his life. And indeed this is what happens: Kitty's contemptuous accusation of him as old and emasculate generates a murderous fury which takes him to stab her continually with an ice-pick, as fig. 67 above shows. His brutal thrusts certainly translate in a monstrous manner the erotic pleasure he has been deprived of, underlying the relationship between sex and death that the film seems to maintain. Sarcastically, it is Johnny who gets accused, convicted and executed for Kitty's murder, despite his attempts to lay the blame on Cross.

Eventually the paintings get displayed in an art gallery under the name of "Katherine March". Just as an early stroke of fatal luck - from which the cataclysm of other fatal actions will follow - Adele happens to walk by it and with a Medusa-like face rushes back home into the kitchen where her husband is and asks him: "How long have you known Katherine March? Answer me!" Chris, who is again with his apron on and his huge chopping knife cutting pieces of liver, is perplexed that she would ask him such a question. Having the knife pointed at her, she says "keep away that knife... do you want to cut my throat?" No answer is required as his eyes speak for themselves. Chris is shocked when his wife calls him a liar and accuses him of copying the work of a "real artist" as she saw the paintings signed "Katherine March".

Unable to go to the police and unable to paint because his name has been usurped, we now see Chris turn into a smelly confused vagabond (fig. 77) wandering the street, on whom life has played a cruel trick, whose mantra – “ten thousand dollars!” – we hear along with him, as the painting is transported out of the art gallery (fig. 75) and sold to a rich man. He eventually goes into a hotel room and in a blatantly expressionist scene we now



Figure 77. *Scarlet Street*

see him in this scruffy room, squirming in pain, the shimmering light from a neon sign intermittently piercing through the darkness. He suffers a mental breakdown as he is confronted with a phantom image of his past, totally obsessed with the taunting voices of Kitty and Johnny, when they used to be together. Again a mantra-like refrain with Kitty’s voice lingers on his mind: “You killed me, Chris. You’re old and ugly and you killed me”, mixed with the music of “Melancholy Baby” which they used to listen to together. He attempts to hang himself, but is rescued and becomes a pauper with no means of claiming credit for his own paintings. Brought to an end, the street gets completely deserted of people and Chris becomes then the paradigmatic night urban vagrant, still with Kitty’s “jeepers Johnny, I love you” echoing in his head.

2.1.1.4 Conclusion

All in all, there is some pity in Lang's *noir* vision of Chris Cross's character, but a touch of contempt as well. Although Chris is portrayed as childish, called ugly by Kitty and ends up insane, Lang views his painting sympathetically. Christopher Cross's disintegration relies heavily on the dramatic dark psychology that is present in *Scarlet Street*: that of an ugly man, with a sense of low self-worth. In other *noir* triangles, Cross / Robinson would be the other man, the richer sinister (Conte, McCready, Laughton, etc) more powerful figure who is the protagonist's rival. The "lookism" in which Hollywood deals is also made clear in this film, and it also indicates how classical Hollywood cinema most often presented modern art as a sign of insanity, evil intentions, or the butt of a joke.⁸⁶

Both *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* are evocative of the Weimar Street films with their middle-aged male protagonists obsessed with younger woman. In both films Fritz Lang's concerns with desire, violence and unstable identity are readily perceptible. In the former, Edward G. Robinson plays the role of middle-aged psychology professor Richard Wanley who sees the oil portrait of Alice Reed in a storefront window, and then meets the dream image of a woman herself on the street, as she passes by and her mirror-like image is reflected in the glass (fig. 78). After buying her a drink, she invites him to her apartment to see some sketches made by the same artist. In an act of jealousy, Alice's lover Mazard (Arthur Loft) appears and attacks Richard. In self-defense, Wanley stabs him with a pair of scissors, a desperate act that plunges him into the *noir* world of murder, blackmail and deceit. For *Scarlet Street*, the parallelism is more than evident: the same trio cast (Robinson, Bennett and Duryea) - though here we get to receive a more intense message about the reticent morality of the middle-class - the same plot (that of a middle-aged little man infatuated by a young woman who then murders a man); an identical crime weapon (a pair of scissors and an ice-pick), and a similar ending - though *The Woman in the Window* inserts a blatant cop-out finish, and *Scarlet Street* is implacable in its gloom psychology, as Aaron Sultanik notes, "(...) the stark psychosexual drama of *Scarlet Street* offers no moral alternative in its study of Robinson's and America's dark,

⁸⁶ Chris's bathroom "exposition of art" seems to contain hidden messages, inner meanings he himself cannot verbalise.

unexplored other side” (Sultanik 1986:201). Finally, in both films the performance of Joan Bennett is perhaps the most expressive and entrancing narrative signifier as she manages to draw from various personae (a gamine, a prostitute, a damsel in distress) to make an impression and to draw Robinson into an infatuation with her.



Figure 78. *The Woman in the Window*

Few other directors of that period would have conceived of, and even fewer got away with, this Langian pairing of sadomasochistic violence with illicit desire. The Production Code office specifically forbade this kind of treatment of the topic. Movies like *Double Indemnity* and *Scarlet Street* were able to artfully circumvent most of the rules put forward by the Production Code. In fact, I strongly believe that these types of films led to the Code's demise. Unwelcome as the Code was, however, it forced filmmakers to suggest rather than state and consequently the meanings of crime movies were left more open to potentially rich interpretation. This situation obviously led to a necessary ambiguity and mode of indirection in all movies regulated by the Production Code. *Noir* was already embracing the non-naturalistic through Expressionist and Poetic Realist influences, as I explained in Part II, and the Production Code unintentionally abetted this. Fritz Lang, in an interview he gave, commented on the effects of censorship on his film and how he managed to turn it to advantage:

Question: *Scarlet Street* had the same trio of stars as *The Woman in the Window*: Joan Bennett, Edward G. Robinson and Dan Duryea. Did you have censorship problems with the movie because Duryea, who had been conning Robinson, with Bennett's help, goes to the chair for killing her – when in reality Robinson did it?

Fritz Lang's answer: The studio worried about that, but I pointed out that Robinson is punished more by living with his guilt than he would have been by going to jail. At the end of the film he is a man driven by the Furies, at his wit's end. Interestingly enough, not one review complained that an innocent man had to go to the chair for a crime he did not commit. But the reason that no one commented on it is possibly not because they were aware that he had done a lot of other things that would have justified his death, but because they simply did not like the character. If this is so one wonders if the morals of the average moviegoer have eroded over the years.

(Server & Gorman 1998:25)

Scarlet Street implies, for example, as strongly as possible under the Production Code, that Johnny was a pimp with whom Kitty argues over money. Moreover, in a cut scene, Chris was to have witnessed the execution of his rival, but instead, dismissed for embezzlement, he becomes a blundering tramp. In the case of *The Woman in the Window*, the ending was also changed from the film's source novel to comply with the Code and with it the "Crime Does Not Pay" principle and its issues of sexual misconduct that the film portrays. In an intelligent slow track back from his flabby body, the camera reveals that these events happened in fantasy when Wanley had inoffensively fallen asleep in the overstuffed chair at his club. The movie is indeed filled with all types of Freudian psychological readings about sexual tensions and repressions. In the first scenes, Wanley, in his role of a college teacher, is lecturing students about psychoanalytical concepts that to a certain extent represent his own repressed desires to demonstrate his manhood (when contemplating the painting in the window, for example, he turns to Alice and asks her whether this was aptly heterosexual: "Did I react properly, ah, normally?").

Through the dark camera shots and angles cinematographer Milton Krasner manages in both films to add to the tension in Robinson's internal struggles. Moreover, the multifaceted *mise-en-scène* of clocks, mirrors, paintings and windows, as seen above, also help to convey the hysterical fatefulness of the main protagonist in both films. But, more importantly, the complex journey Chris Cross experiences with his unstable identity throughout *Scarlet Street* appears to be the one that Fritz Lang had set for himself and simultaneously for the viewer, ascribing thus much of the underlying power of his film style.

2.2 Robert Siodmak

Born at the turn of a new century, August 8, 1900 in Dresden, Germany, Robert Siodmak was “a sensible and reliable director,” as he liked to call himself. During the ten years he worked in Hollywood (1941-1951), Siodmak produced 23 movies, ranging from extensively admired thrillers and period dramas to several of the most influential *noirs* of the forties, including *The Killers* and *Criss Cross*. Yet, as Joseph Greco notes, his name has never truly come to prominence, at least not in the same way as Alfred Hitchcock’s, a man with whom he was compared as a possible rival. Having said that, interestingly enough, Siodmak once said that,

Making a film is a matter of cooperation. If you look at the final credits, which nobody reads except for insiders, then you are surprised to see how many colleagues you had who took care of all the details. Everyone says, “I made the film” and doesn’t realize that in the case of a success all branches of film making contributed to it. The director, of course, has everything under control. (in Greco 1999:4)

From the *auteur* perspective, in fact, Siodmak has long been seen as a mere “assignment director,” never an artist in complete control of his work. However, he undeniably brought many positive aspects of his German cinema background to his projects and directed some very accomplished *noir* films. Stylistically, his films make use of innovative cinematic techniques, namely deep focussing, multiple flashbacks, and Expressionistic lighting. They often address modern themes such as psychological trauma and aberrant behaviour (*The Dark Mirror*, 1946), crime, gender conflicts, domestic strife, and violence and professional gangsterism (*Cry of the City*, 1948), revealing a notable influence from Central European currents of ideas, as do his fellow expatriates from Germany and Austria (Preminger, Lang, and Wilder).

Siodmak’s European films were not particularly appreciated in America and he was reconciled to becoming a journeyman director of “B” features for different studios. He then achieved a long-term contract with Universal in 1943, where his brother Curt already was

an accepted and well-known screenwriter. As discussed in chapter 1.6 (p. 195), this studio focused essentially on horror films, and Siodmak was asked to direct the programmer *Son of Dracula* (1943), but still managed to bring his original compositions to this Gothic horror film, before going on to make *Phantom Lady*, Universal's first *noir*, a film which not only boosted Siodmak's career but also gave him the possibility of working on one of the pulpiest of Woolrich novels (the film's tour de force jazz as sex sequence analysed on p. 211).

Siodmak's second film for Universal, *Christmas Holiday* (1944), is his most unusual *noir* movie, with a bizarre flashback structure, and more audacious than *Phantom Lady* in its examination of sexual pathology. In this film, Siodmak was attempting the same sort of transformation as was shown in Ella Raines's impersonation of a street-walker at the jazz club, when Deena Durbin (in the role of Abigail Mannette) sings her trademark ballads sheathed in a tight black dress. The relationships of love and sex (with suggestions of incest and homosexuality) are so vividly presented in the film (deployed with a touch of blunt wit and about as much perverse sexuality as the Code would allow)⁸⁷ that they evoke the *noir* underworld as if it were the foundation of all corruption, like Eliot's skull beneath the skin, underlying an ostensibly attractive reality.

Looking back on his career, Siodmak saw himself trapped in crime films, as he says:

I was under contract to Universal International, and as it is usual in the film city, if you are successful at making a certain type of picture then you are given more of them to make. You have to be one of the boys! (Siodmak 1959:10)

However, in his opinion, crime films were for stirring major emotions and they were the type of films that managed to provide some depth of characterisation, especially because they searched for the motivation of the protagonist, trying to understand his position and above all creating sympathy for him / her. This he considered to be the major difference from the thirties gangster films. This sympathy was an important element to appear in his other two films for Universal, *The Suspect* (1944) and *Uncle Harry* (1945,

⁸⁷ When the script was sent to Joe Breen to see whether there was potential material to produce a film by Hays Code standards, Breen advised against *Christmas Holiday*: "The specific objection to this material is that it is a story of gross sexual irregularities which not only contains 'no compensating moral values' of any kind, but, on the contrary, it is a story which condones and justifies, and makes it appear 'right and acceptable' this improper sex" (August 14, 1939) (in Greco 1999:27)

aka *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry*). In the former, the central male protagonist, middle-aged Philip Marshall (Charles Laughton) kills his wife when she discovers that he is involved (though not physically) with young Mary Gray (Ella Raines). The viewer's sympathy is grounded in the fact that Philip is a good-natured and hopelessly hen-pecked shopkeeper, seething with repressed desires. Similarly to *The Spiral Staircase*, to be discussed next, *The Suspect* also deals with Victorian sexual maladjustment and murder but from the point-of-view of the killer rather than the victim. The latter *Uncle Harry* introduces bachelor Harry Quincy (George Sanders) who lives a dull life with his domineering sisters, hypochondriac Lettie (Geraldine Fitzgerald) and querulous widow Hester (Moyna MacGill). His developing relationship with Deborah Brown (Ella Raines) will lead the repressed Harry to an elaborate murder scheme. The portrayal of obsessive love between brother and sister (with its consequent suggestion of incest) is developed in the same direct way as such other films as *Phantom Lady* or *The Dark Mirror*.

Both films therefore present archetypal downtrodden male characters, gripped by hidden sexual desires which reveal and discharge their dark, murderous selves, and finally both pictures reveal Siodmak's sustained concern with duality, masochism, and vicious relationships. In *The Suspect's* finale, Philip, freed from the work-a-day world, tries to resume being, as he calls it, "a pillar of respectability", but finds himself alone on a darkened street. Charles Laughton's character and the mental turmoil he experiences after his criminal act resemble the protagonists of Siodmak's major *noir* films, like *The File on Thelma Jordon* (1950).

Lettie from *Uncle Harry*, in turn, is convicted of her sister's murder but does not incriminate Harry because she knows that her death will prevent him from marrying Deborah. Harry wakes up and discovers that the entire situation has been a dream. His recourse to an elaborate murder scheme as opposed to a direct, adult confrontation with his sisters reinforces the idea that his reverie is a manifestation of profound guilt over his sexual attraction to his sister. Just like Richard Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) in *The Woman in the Window*, Harry awakens from an intolerable dream situation with relief but finds himself no less oppressed by reality than he was before. The disguised dream plot was one of Hollywood's ways of approaching salacious forbidden desires, while allowing themselves the easy get-out of disavowal.

Siodmak's next two films for Universal, *The Killers* and *Criss Cross*, would be seen as mere prelude to the world of *film noir* and show the influence of another independent producer, Mark Hellinger, who was especially keen on hard-boiled fiction set in realistic locations. Both films demonstrate Siodmak's take on the criminal *noir* thriller: a strong fascination with romantic love and pathological relationships. *The Killers* made the reputation of all those involved in it, most especially Burt Lancaster and Ava Gardner, including Anthony Veiller and John Huston's, who both wrote the script based on the same flashback structure (eleven fragmented flashbacks in total) used in *Citizen Kane* (see p. 351) and who contributed to the whole success of the film. Based on the short story by Hemingway, *The Killers* introduces a genuine *noir* story of anxiety and failure of various protagonists, namely Burt Lancaster (the "Swede" in the film), who eventually gets killed. An insurance investigator, Jim Reardon (Edward O'Brien), is then assigned to trap the bad men who were responsible for Swede's murder. Symbolically, the movie ends with Reardon smiling at the camera and giving the spectators an enthusiastic salute as "The End" appears (fig. 79).



Figure 79. *The Killers*

The music score by Miklós Rózsa intensifies the hard-edged aspect of the film, especially, for example, when unscrupulous Kitty (Ava Gardner) gets arrested by the police and gets criminally implicated in front of her dying husband.

Despite the obvious similarities between the two films, *Criss Cross* still stands as one of the best *noir* films by Robert Siodmak. As the story's narrator, the central protagonist is Steve Thompson (Burt Lancaster) who returns home to Los Angeles after having spent a rather long time away. The irresistible attraction of the Rondo Club where he meets his ex-wife Anna (Yvonne De Carlo) leads him to a sequence of events that he cannot control: "It was in the cards. No way of stopping it. (...) It was fate". Eager to rekindle their relationship, Anna marries nonetheless the small-time gangster Slim Dundee (Dan Duryea). In an anxious attempt to win her back, Steve leads Dundee into an armored-truck payroll heist and thus initiates the act in which he is the major victim.



Figure 80. *Criss Cross*

This combination of credulity and deceitfulness (a *noir* movie which is filled with obsessive love and betrayal) is extremely significant throughout the film as it helps to define Steve's own actions. When, for example, he is pursued by Dundee whom he has betrayed, he tries to escape with Anna. While using a rather ingenious scheme, he manages to bribe one of Dundee's men to take him instead to their "meeting" at the beach house (a typical *noir* location). In this apparently immature situation, Anna is dismayed by Steve's naive attitude and she rashly packs her things up and tries to escape to save herself and the

money from Dundee. A more harrowing moment is when Slim enters the room, with the two lovers trapped, as in the first scene, but this time awaiting death. In a rather cynical ending, the couple die like romantic lovers, in each other's arms (fig. 80 above) and whispering each other's names. The final shot is once again accompanied by Miklós Rózsa's powerful score, focussing on their two bodies which finally get united but this time in death. The music carries then a tragic charge, emphasising the moonlit ocean behind them and creating an even more tragic context.

The File on Thelma Jordon (1950) was Siodmak's final *noir* production, made for Paramount, and is considered to be his most discerning analysis of duality and obsession. Cleve Marshall (Wendell Corey) is another of the helpless *noir* males; he is a happily married assistant District Attorney who, like John Forbes in *Pitfall*, feels trapped in a routine and humiliated by his father-in-law, a successful judge, who dominates his life. His life radically changes when he first meets Thelma Jordon (Barbara Stanwyck), an autonomous and alluring woman, who one night shows up in his office. They get involved in an illicit love affair, and soon plot a scheme together (reminding us of Walter and Phyllis in *Double Indemnity*) when Thelma's wealthy aunt Vera Edwards (Gertrude W. Hoffman) is found shot. Unlike the usual cold, passionless *femme fatale*, Thelma has a heart and is more sympathetic (even towards Cleve's personal and professional life).



Figure 81. *The File on Thelma Jordon*

Thelma is still in love with the vicious jewel thief Tony Laredo (Richard Rober), who convinced her to live with her aunt and steal her jewels. During the robbery, she shoots her aunt, but makes it appear an outside job. She then calls Cleve and, although he suspects her, he decides to remove all evidence which would incriminate Thelma (fig. 81) and he continues to protect her. In the end, knowing that his life and career are ruined, Cleve walks off into the shadows and must from then on bear the weight of his own mistake.

Siodmak directs with a particular sense for the characters' romantic desperation using the bleak lighting by cinematographer George Barnes, and the film comes out with a quality which is very similar to Lang's dark, romantic desolation seen above in *Scarlet Street*. The film is an intelligent examination of the justice system, the way an individual can get away with murder and manipulate the system to his or her own ends (the scene when Thelma is on trial at the court is remarkable with Cleve strategically presenting the elements of the crime to her advantage).

On the whole, and to conclude, Siodmak's style is smooth going for long takes rather than a rapid pace, creating more clever effects that make him stand out as a European director. It is also true that his style and his movies became slightly less personal, not to mention that they also got longer and slower over the years, especially after his peak period of productivity in Hollywood (two or three films a year). One might mention, for example, *Custer of the West* in 1967 and the largely negative reaction the film got from the critics. Yet, for the purpose of the *noir* movement, Siodmak's works indicate the main concerns of the cycle with darkness, cruelty, obsession, and betrayal. He has a tendency to combine existentialist fatalism with a similarly powerful romanticism, revealing a profound visual imagination and consistency in terms of thematic obsessions and the stylistic tropes that elucidate them. All these features generated a body of work that used both *noir*'s hard-boiled and its Gothic inheritance. The significant quality of his films is their intensity and complexity of characterisation, with men and women presented as alienated and ambivalent figures, chasing illusions, and destroyed by their own desires.

2.2.1 *The Spiral Staircase* (1946) and the Gothic Noir



Directed by Robert Siodmak

Produced by Dore Shary

Written by Ethel Lina White

Starring Dorothy McGuire, George Brent, Ethel Barrymore, Kent Smith, Rhonda Fleming

Photography by Nicholas Musuraca

Music Score by Roy Webb

Costume Design by Edward Stevenson

Film Editing by Harry W. Gerstad

As noted in the chapter on “The Gothic Romance” in Part *II*, the influence of horror films on *film noir* has been considerable. The Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century established important roots both for nineteenth-century stage melodrama (a theatre of sensational events and heightened emotionalism) and also for the melodramatic strand that continued throughout the twentieth century in both literature and film. The material used in these Gothic and melodramatic novels would focus on the image of a single, vulnerable woman, insidiously preyed upon either physically or psychologically, as a way of appealing to the sympathy of the largely but not exclusively female reader. Such material need not be, but often was, set in the historical past, but it always accentuated the sufferings of the woman in distress. The oppressed heroine is nearly always the central figure of the novel, presented to us as a pensive, lonely, and terrified creature.

Adaptations of the Brontë sisters' novels (1939-45) were distant antecedents for the emergence of Gothic *noir*. The vogue for such material was at its height during the forties and generated a surprisingly large number of films. Many of these films will be referred to in connection with Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase*. I intend to show that the material present in these Gothic novels and the films made from them blur the boundary between *film noir* and horror cinema. Indeed, when it comes to *film noir* we tend to regard highly the contribution of the hard-boiled tradition, but as I have discussed before, the Gothic legacy is indisputable and needs to be taken into account as well. Yet, the major distinction between *film noir* and Gothic *noir* lies in the gender of the protagonist: while the hard-boiled tradition was dominated by the male-oriented crime thriller, the Gothic *noirs* privileged the role of imperilled victim-heroines, and are thus often referred to as the "Female Gothic" films. After all, as noted by Andrew Spicer:

Hollywood drew extensively on this Gothic tradition in the 1940s as a branch of the 'woman's film', aimed at the numerically dominant female audience and displaying an ambivalent attitude towards the Victorian period. The first Gothic noir was Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). (Spicer 2002:11)

As this suggests, it will be possible to reinforce how difficult genre separation can be, as this group of films – *film noir* and Gothic *noir* - sharing similar styles and contexts of production, are often judged to be two distinctive film categories. This debate also occurs in literary fields where there still seems to be a generic conflict within the Gothic novel (a novel of "terror" or a novel of "horror"?, as Robert Hume (1969:283) had distinguished). With *The Spiral Staircase* I want to endorse what Raymond Durgnat maintains about *film noir* that it "describes not genres but dominant cycles and motifs, but in many, if not most, films would come under two headings, since interbreeding is intrinsic to motif processes" (Durgnat 1970:51).

The Spiral Staircase is one of Siodmak's most richly styled works, so it is proposed to explore the set of devices used here by its director. In order to amplify the suspense and sense of premonition, Helen Capel (Dorothy McGuire) is often watched only through the menacing eyes of her stalker. I will then discuss the works of Michael Powell's psychological thriller *Peeping Tom* (1960) and John Carpenter's horror film *Halloween* (1978), as they are both usually credited with establishing the identification between the camera, the spectator and murderous instincts. But Siodmak does it with masterly effect,

here increased by the unsteady black-and-white visuals. The emotion of manipulation that Gothic novels produced in the reader was now transferred to the screen, and the techniques used augment the immediacy of dramatic events and the impending doom of the main character.

The film gained much reputation because of this subtle mastery, its high production values, but also because of its powerful casting, namely that of Ethel Barrymore, “the first lady of the American stage” as the family matriarch. Awarded best supporting actress for her performance as ailing Mrs. Warren, her character spends most of the film in bed as an invalid matriarch but who nevertheless skilfully depicts her character’s sense of mounting terror (fig. 82). In turn, the role young Helen plays as a live-in companion to the wealthy lady is also a very good performance, especially taking into account that she is voiceless.



Figure 82. *The Spiral Staircase*

Finally, from the perspective of photography, the ideas of *The Spiral Staircase* are rendered through many expressionist cinematographic techniques. By using deep-focus, Siodmak and cinematographer Musuraca not only manage to create this sense of a disturbed self for Albert Warren (George Brent) but the various layered sets that contain foregrounds and backgrounds also provide a context of psychological damage for the other members of the Warren family too. The deep focus technique is able to express the complex, secluded space that the Warrens inhabit. The claustrophobic enclosure of the

house, as I will discuss later, is emphasised through shots, for example, at low angles to include ceilings, carved mouldings with angled surfaces, all given depth and mass by chiaroscuro lighting.

2.2.1.1 Voyeurism and Entrapment

The themes of voyeurism and entrapment are reinforced by those numerous close-ups in which we see a malevolently glaring hidden eye watching Helen from the darkness. It was, apparently, Siodmak himself, as Dorothy McGuire revealed during an interview: “That was his eye. He was that vain!” In this regard, one can see that film producer Val Lewton⁸⁸ and director Siodmak were both influenced by Hitchcock, who had a penchant as well for this kind of suspense and the telling insertion of his own directorial presence (his well-known and ingenious cameo appearances in his own films).

The camerawork is conspicuous from the very opening scenes, in which a carriage pulls up just in front of the hotel, and the camera rises up to a room where a crippled girl is being watched as she undresses. This first murder, accomplished as the girl pulls her dress over her head, introduces a note of Expressionism in terms of the power to “see”. For the sake of conveying the young girl’s inner feelings, reality seems to be distorted; hence the only vision that we get is the eye (fig. 83) and it is through it that we perceive the internal emotions of the girl being attacked. This scene, photographed in gradually darkening light by Nicholas Musuraca, contains a strange erotic charge composed of fear and possessiveness which is later emphasised also through the way that Musuraca stages lighting effects to induce visual and aural hallucinations in Helen and Albert Warren, the elder son of the house in the film.

⁸⁸ See p. 128 for the films produced by Val Lewton, such as 1943’s *I Walked Like a Zombie* and 1944’s *Cat People*.



Figure 83. *The Spiral Staircase*

This prototype of the voyeur-eye was later applied by other film directors, particularly Michael Powell with *Peeping Tom* (1960), a controversial British horror film that focuses on a young man who kills women while using a handheld movie camera to record their twisted features and dying expressions of terror. The film is similarly charged with psychological density and deals with the issue of voyeurism from the audience point of view as they watch the protagonist's actions. One could also point out the stylistic and thematic similarities to Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) or Carpenter's *Halloween*, as both films contain a contorted Freudian plotting and play mercilessly on audience voyeurism and identification with their villains.

The screening of the film at the hotel makes most sense as a way of externalising the image which is first linked to a subjective vision but transformed afterwards into a larger metaphor. While Helen and the other spectators are watching the silent movie, the camera moves to one of the rooms upstairs to reveal the actual murder of a crippled girl, who cannot yell for help from her room. Now, as viewers, we again only see the murderer's wide-open eye peering out from an open closet with a rack of dresses (fig. 83). As the young lady tries to pull her dress over her head, the murderer strikes and we see her arms convulsively cross in terror. Meanwhile, the guests downstairs are also watching a

silent movie. As spectators, we feel divided and unable to reconcile two contradictory perspectives offered to us simultaneously: Helen's muteness is then the metaphor which accompanies that of the film at the hotel (silent movie, just images) and that of the girl upstairs being killed (she is kept silent, just her arms are frenetically moving). The happy images from the film *The Kiss* are intercut with those agonising ones from the scene in the room upstairs. Narrative certainty is thus destabilised and so is our position as viewers. With its expressionistic aesthetics, this particular opening scene lacks the narrative organising principles of time, space and causality and further accentuates the narrative ambiguity or for that matter its claim to represent any degree of objective reality.

The old creepy and dark Warren mansion is the space where virtually the entire film takes place. In the Gothic novel, the action usually takes place in an apparently abandoned great house or castle which normally provides an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. Through secret passages, secret rooms, and dark and hidden staircases, the castle of the Gothic novel is usually substituted by the mansion or "the old dark house" in film, where unusual camerawork with bizarre angles, continued close-ups, and darkness and shadows contribute to the same feeling of claustrophobia and entrapment. In *The Spiral Staircase*, the action occurs in a big Victorian house, the décor of which is designed to emphasise the role of repression and emotional disturbance in the characters. Film historian Christopher Justice writes:

The setting of the mansion in *The Spiral Staircase* is full of Victorian ornaments that suggest a longing for not only the chronological past, but for something sensed but not altogether identifiable. Siodmak's use of deep-focus also reveals his tribute to Orson Welles and *Citizen Kane*, the high priest of that directorial brotherhood. Siodmak clearly used *Kane*'s influence to embellish his own films, and like most good directors during that era, did so in a creative manner (...). (Justice 2003)

The "chronological past" is an important element in the Gothic novel, though one could argue that the past here is used more atmospherically (since there is little reference beyond a nuclear family history), as it emphasises the feeling of the unknown and adds horror and mystery to the whole context. In this film, the setting of the ornamented mansion suggests indeed "a longing for (...) something sensed but not altogether identifiable". The Warren family home is also inhabited by Steven, Ms Warren's obnoxious grown up son, who has just returned from Paris. Yet, as viewers, we are told little about his past, or even about his bookish half-brother biology professor Albert

Warren, making either of them the potential serial killer on the loose and targeting young women who have a physical disability.

The Spiral Staircase is part of a set of *noir* films by Siodmak that follow the same path, that of expressionist nightmare, persecution mania and psychological irrationality, especially traceable in films such as *The Phantom Lady*, *The Killers*, *The Dark Mirror*, and *Criss Cross*. With these, Siodmak creates a body of films notable for their sense of psychological and physical corruption in a time when Freudian psychology was reaching the peak of its popularity. With *The Dark Mirror*, for example, Siodmak portrays an irrational world hypnotised by its own reflection and uses his own version of psychoanalysis to come up with explanations for his characters' delusions. The film, in fact, deals with the expressionist *Doppelgänger* motif (see p. 89) – Olivia de Havilland plays a dual role of identical twin sisters, Ruth and Terry Collins, whose personality traits are antithetical. Here too, the topic of voyeurism is very much related to the tropes of mirrors as both direct the viewer to logically think about diverse psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship, a subject dealt with in several films by Siodmak, and most notably in the opening sequence of *The Spiral Staircase*. Screenwriter Nunnally Johnson carefully



Figure 84. *The Dark Mirror*

focuses on the explicitly Freudian analysis of pair's behaviour, that the twins respectively represent the good and evil sides of human beings. The film also deploys mirrors (it actually opens and ends depicting a disordered room with a broken mirror) to indicate that the two female characters share divided loyalties and ambivalent emotions (fig. 84). Ruth plays the loving sister, the one that psychiatrist Scott Elliott (Lew Ayres) falls in love with when he is called upon to investigate the murderous *femme fatale* Terry (the sisters' shared boyfriend had been murdered in cold blood and witnesses identify one of them as the culprit but are not able to tell them apart).

In contrast, *The Spiral Staircase* reflects a different type of vice, that of compensatory psychotic violence, with a protagonist who has committed a string of murders (all of the victims sufferers of a certain physical affliction or some kind of physical imperfection). The killer's identity has eluded the police. The Constable's (James Bell) words are clear though concerning the killer: "Somebody in this town. Somebody we all know. Someone we see everyday. Might be me. Might be you." The police may not know who the murderer is, but they suspect that the next victim may be Helen, who was struck dumb after a childhood trauma involving a fire. This is the contrived postulate of the drama.

The film is therefore heavily over-determined as a suspenseful psychological drama, in which the characters move about in an old house, full of dark corners, flickering candles, and which has its own in-house killer. It manages to penetrate the minds of the characters, most especially that of Professor Albert who, we are told in the second part, was the one to look after Steven's mother, while his brother has never cared much for anyone but himself and travelled around the world. But at least the latter seems less inhibited as a person in his own way. Unusually for a whodunit, the identity of the murderer is narrowed down to the two bitter rival stepbrothers. It is also revealed that their dead hunter father had always called them weaklings because they never knew how to use a gun. The film is openly (even absurdly) Freudian, uncovering developmental family problems, so the spectator can easily understand how deranged the guilty son is. He is a voyeur, entrapped in his own childhood past.

2.2.1.2 The “Optical Unconscious” Camera-Eye

The way cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca prowls with his camera – especially in the scenes in the basement – and uses depth of field to reveal the terror that haunts the characters’ mind (especially Helen’s who simply does not know what to do next) is remarkable. At this level, the cinematic meta-language deployed in the movie also helps characterise the inner self of the protagonists. The cinematographer manages to deepen our perception of the characters’ subjectivity by making visible the unconscious life, or in other words, the camera reflects here what one could call the “optical unconscious”. An apt illustration of this dimension is the already-mentioned early scene that takes place at the hotel where we, as spectators, see the audience watching the projections of a silent film called *The Kiss* (fig. 85). The function of this particular scene is twofold:



Figure 85. *The Spiral Staircase*

via the meta-language of the cinema (through the eye of the camera, we see the audience that watches a film), we watch a film within a film, which happens to be just as silent as the main protagonist. This provides a different level of content constituted by a signifying system. The second function is that this scene is again played by the legitimising eye of the camera: the two images (the one that the “optical unconscious” eye of the camera reveals

to us and the picture depicted in the film the people are watching at the hotel) are no longer semantically separable. In fact, the “optical unconscious” invariably comes with a perspective attached to it, which makes us take part in the subjective gaze of the camera. For many linguists, meta-language as seen in this context is conceived as reflexivity, and both are critical qualities of natural language. From a cinematic point of view, this is also the case: they both are forms of enunciation. Metz too believes that they can be applied to film:

All figures of enunciation consist in a metadiscursive folds of cinematic instances piled on top of each other. (...) In subjective framing, the gazing and at the same time showing character duplicates, that is, “reflects” both the spectator and the camera. (Metz 1982:55)

This symbiosis of human being and the film-machine, or this idea of “film-eye”⁸⁹ was a method used by many *noir* directors, such as Fritz Lang, who was himself a user of such projections within a picture. In his *Metropolis*, the workers are dehumanised, and this dualism has its decisive expression in the female robot referred to as the “Maschinenmensch” or the “Machine Human”. The tension between these two dimensions that is present in the film is a key force in destabilising the viewer’s interpretation.

Finally, the implication of the new signified obtained from the “cine-eye” in *The Spiral Staircase* conceals a hidden meaning which can be revealed if, as Roland Barthes puts it (see p. 261), the image is analysed in terms of signifier and signified. In this case, the hidden “symbolic” and ideological is obtained at the level of meaning with a signified: the eye of the murderer becomes the eye of the camera, then the audience’s downstairs in the hotel theatre, and ultimately, the spectator’s eye, who acts as a silent voyeur. The camera holds on the intruder’s eyes in extreme close-up as “he” watches the woman get undressed.

In turn, the camera-eye in fig. 86 below seems to be separate, detached from what is depicted. It becomes a way of looking at the object-in-picture, and in this case the spectator adopts the point of view of the camera. In cinematic terms, this is often referred to as “subjectivisation” by the camera as a causal effect. Here the subjective viewpoint of the

⁸⁹ This technique reached its peak with the Russian Constructivists, notably in the work of Dziga Vertov with his “Kino-Eye” (“Cine-Eye”) method. Vertov believed that by being a “mechanical eye” (as he would refer to it himself), the camera could complement the faculty of human sight.

camera is expressive, as it informs us that the character is looking down the stairs and still does not know (nor do we) if he or she is going to encounter anyone on the way.



Figure 86. *The Spiral Staircase*

One could also question why we assume it is a male eye or, in Barthesian terms, one could affirm the eye works as a photograph which constitutes a message without a code, making it difficult therefore to ascertain that that particular eye reproduces the real directly from a male eye: “only the photograph is able to transmit the (literal) information without forming it by means of discontinuous signs and rules of transformation” (Barthes 1977:43). The type of perception the spectator gets from that object denotes the way he or she perceives that reality, imbued with certain codes and within a certain culture (the ideological function language has, according to Barthes). This apparent recognition of a male eye can even function as another way to further confuse and cloud the whole investigation pursued by the local Police Constable. After all, what makes him believe that

the murderer is in fact a man? Antony Easthope affirms that, in a visual image, this relation between the arbitrary strings of signifiers and the concepts or meanings assigned to any organisation of signifieds is “iconic”:

In film, as in language, the relation between the celluloid strip projected onto a screen, the shaped and patterned visual image, and what the image may represent – a house, a tree, a person – is the relation between signifier and signified. But unlike language that relation is iconic (the image resembles what it represents) and indexical (the image as effect of a photochemical process is caused by what it represents). There is, then, no equivalent in cinema for the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified by which a string of purely abstract phonemes through social conventions becomes able to mean a house, a tree or a person. (Easthope 1993:7)

It is also for that very reason that film theories often tried to solve this naturalist fallacy, as what we watch on the screen is never the real itself, or, as Christian Metz puts it, “the image of a house does not signify “house”, but rather “here is a house (...)” (Metz 1974:116). For now, we only see what the murderer’s eye sees, and as the camera shuts that particular scene off, almost as the eye blinks, the lame girl is dropped dead on the floor, strangled. This scene stands as a good example of a processed or constructed cinematic image, as a signifier that stands for something which is absent. In that lapse of time, the spectator is capable of building the “unreality” of that cinematic image, and although the object (the murdering scene) is actually lacking, we turn to all sorts of forms of (mental) manipulation and construction to provide for the photographic realism we derive from this scene.

The mind here works by selection and ordering, and this follows the single model of the mind proposed by Metz, who accounts for the effect a given set of scenes has on the viewer. Just like the dictionary (the paradigmatic law) that contains our possibilities of selection, the grammar book (the syntagmatic law) governs the ordering of whatever is selected. Lacanian psychoanalysis, followed by Metz and most film theorists, explicitly echoes this same model. The unconscious is structured like a language, or, as Lacan puts it (Lacan 1977:203), the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, the field of radical alterity (otherness). It too operates via principles of selection and ordering, and if the self is denied any point of reference, then Lacan’s “structurally dynamic unconscious” becomes a confrontation with the ego psychology. At this level, Freud’s concept of condensation - which functions by means of selection and displacement or by means of a “circuitous

ordering” - appears to match this model, whereas, according to Lacan’s interpretation, condensation is related to the metaphor and displacement is identified with metonymy.

The master concepts of selection and ordering move us from semiotics to rhetorical analysis and even to psychoanalysis. In *The Spiral Staircase* we have many elements that help us focus on psychoanalytical aspects of the characters, inside their (contorted) minds: Helen, a young mute girl who suffered a shock when she was still a child; Parry, a doctor who is in love with Helen and wants to help her; Albert, a quiet professor who shared with his brother Steve a nasty past marked by his contemptuous father, a strong and strict man, a womaniser who never allowed any sort of weakness in his children. In addition to the notion of the aforementioned voyeurism, the film follows psychoanalytic film theory to the extent that it reflects the power of the cinema over the individual. The spectator, as in the eyes of the voyeur, is offered particular identifications, but, as Lacan’s theory points out, the identification with the image is simply an illusion, making the subject feel confused and split.

In the fourth part of *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*, Robert Stam emphasises that psychoanalytical film theory examines the way that the cinema works as “a specific kind of spectacle” and bears witness to the influence it has on the individual, both socially and psychically:

If psychoanalysis examines the relations of the subject in discourse, then psychoanalytic film theory meant integrating questions of subjectivity into notions of meaning-production. Moreover, it meant that film-viewing and subject-formation were reciprocal processes: something about our unconscious identity as subjects is reinforced in film viewing, and film viewing is effective because of our unconscious participation. Moving from the interpretation of individual films to a systematic comprehension of the cinematic institution itself, some film theorists saw psychoanalysis as a way of accounting for the cinema’s immediate and pervasive social power. For them the cinema ‘reinscribes’ those very deep and globally structuring processes which form the human psyche, and it does so in such a way that we continually yearn to repeat (or re-enact) the experience. (Stam 1992:124)

The “reciprocal processes” Robert Stam mentions highlight our “unconscious participation” when viewing *The Spiral Staircase*, for example. The film mirrors our latent wishes, and it further seems to explain the quality of voyeurism present in the spectator, but interpreted in various ways, according to our understanding of the world. This explains why each audience member, although sharing the same space and experience in a certain

theatre, will go through and discover different decisive moments in their cinematographic experience.

This theoretical analysis can be used to reinterpret the opening sequences once again. The “unconscious participation” starts in Siodmak’s production with the scene portraying a small audience watching a silent movie. This operates at a metalinguistic level, like a text within a text, in that case, a film within a film, and it sutures together the same means of communication but using two types of audiences, the one in the film (watching a film), and another outside, ultimately the lone individual. In this particularly dynamic opening sequence, Helen, appropriately watching a silent film (a first hint of her own muteness)⁹⁰ on her day-off, immediately becomes the target of attention. In this context, Metz’s dynamic conception of textuality as a natural flow and order is reinforced in these opening scenes: the figures appear here as marks of an irrational discourse which becomes progressively ordered. Therefore, *The Spiral Staircase* is yet further evidence that film operates at three levels: semiotically (the invariant relation of signifier to signified), rhetorically (where figures extend – or in this case, replace – the domain of the signified thus developing an unstable relation between it and its signifier), and psychoanalytically (where a free play of signifiers responds to dynamic instinctual forces and organises itself through the processes associated with the dream work).

To conclude this line of argument, the two plans of action in the first scenes of the film (the hotel room downstairs and the room upstairs) use two different levels of depiction of what is happening. At this level, effectively, Vertov’s primacy of the camera (the abovementioned “Kino-Eye”) over the human eye seems to be potentially out of place in *The Spiral Staircase* (figuratively so, at least). In the film, it is the eye of the strangler (fig. 83) that stands in for the verbal mimesis: it reinforces the concept of voyeurism, yet from a psychic perspective, that of the murderer’s, whose eye reveals apprehension and evil intentions.

The photography of Musuraca is extremely powerful here. With Expressionist concentration, the shadow effect on the left makes us concentrate on the eyeball of the character. The director then literally lunges into the murderer’s eyeball and, the image of the girl being strangled, is reflected only through his iris. The complicity that is built around the spectator is heightened to an extreme, as the viewer is now not only an

⁹⁰ Interestingly, the working title of *The Spiral Staircase* was “The Silence of Helen McCord”.

eyewitness, but at the same time, an inherent part (like an accomplice) of the pursuit and attacks perpetrated on afflicted girls that follow in the film. The filmic expression here is composed of just one shot, enough to express that the human eye “surpasses” the camera-eye. We do not get to see the object (the girl) actively, but rather passively through the killer’s retina, an incredible close-up which shows Helen’s mouth being blotted out (this from the murderer’s point of view). Or, in other words, we only receive the indications of what is happening to the object through the eye of the killer, so the camera becomes passive and registers the event that takes place in front of it.

In fact, there are several sublevels within these scenes. As Metz points out, the “mirror-like nature of cinema” becomes a metaphor in the correlation between the spectator and the signifier. The spectator realises that what he or she is watching is only a recording, yet s/he chooses to understand it as reality within the realms of cinema (in this particular case, s/he understands that the eye is approaching the victim with the intent of killing her – it is reality in this sense – and yet the viewer does not move to protect her - it is within the realms of cinema). Then, as the camera transits to the room downstairs, the viewer becomes aware of the mirror-like process of the apparatus he/she is part of. Then, shifting back to the eye of the murderer, the camera helps the spectator to confirm the missing and imaginary nature of the signifier. Finally, this sequence of the eye in the film is to me the most complex and detailed example of the film’s obsession with the aggressive nature of the process of looking and being looked at.

The only sound that is heard in the hotel room is the music coming from the piano that a lady plays while the film is being projected.⁹¹ The accompanying text or music in this scene is mostly relevant for the *mise-en-scène*, as it fuses with the optical substance of the picture. At a given point, the camera focuses on the lady at the piano, who suddenly strikes a higher note as if pronouncing a judgement about the events upstairs. In fact, all this apparent silence is suddenly broken when a crash sound is heard in the room upstairs, and when the projectionist runs up the stairs to inspect, he finds out the body of the lame girl strangled to death. In this context too, the perceptive eye of the camera (moving from one room to another) is further enhanced, so to speak, by the selective hearing of the camera’s ear (again, the sound played downstairs by the lady differs from the sound heard in the room where the killer is). Without entering into the hierarchy of filmic codes, at the

⁹¹ The film being shown in the small hotel room is actually *The Sands of Dee* (1912) by D.W. Griffith, starring Mae Marsh and Robert Harron, though the post sign at the entrance refers to it as “The Kiss”.

level of the extra-pictorial text, music plays here an important role, adding new meanings to the whole *mise-en-scène*, and emphasising itself instead of the event that is visualised.

2.2.1.3 The *Noir* Staircase: Looking through the Lens of Metonymy

While the credit sequence unfolds at the very beginning of the film, a grand spiral staircase is presented to us, shot from the very top in a snake-like way, so effectively that the image at first may seem like a tunnel with no end or with just a wall of bricks at its extremity (fig. 87). The claustrophobic feeling is then further accentuated with the poor lighting and shadows reflected on the walls, from one single fluttering candle flame. Only a few moments later do we get to see a silhouette of a young woman (the main actress) coming downstairs from the very top of the staircase. We associate our initial claustrophobic feeling now with the girl's engagement in this spinning movement. This gets to be our first contact with the "staircase" and the "spirality" the young girl is to be found in.

The important concepts of selection and ordering (similarity and sequence) seem here to have a relevant interaction with those of condensation and displacement, paradigm and syntagm (analysed on p. 264), metaphor and metonymy. In fact, they all orchestrate the interactions of signifiers and signifieds. These sets are so closely related that they have commonly been combined. I have already mentioned above that the connections between them have been remarked on by Christian Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), but also in the articles by Roman Jakobson "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles" (1956), and Jacques Lacan's "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud" (1977).



Figure 87. *The Spiral Staircase*

Based on contiguity, metonymy does not call for transposition (an imaginative leap) since it involves selection (which *per se* will direct the viewer in envisaging larger frameworks). As a syntagmatic (horizontal, combinative) dimension proposed by Metz, metonymy can function as an important vehicle for expressing non-linguistic relationships. It exploits relationships of physical contiguity between things, not words. Therefore, the complicated image of the staircase in fig. 87 becomes slightly clearer to us by virtue of the exploitation of conceptual contiguity by the trope of metonymy. The spectator, throughout the movie, is concerned about “deconstructing” the meaning of that object and the relationship it has with the characters that live in the big mansion. As we watch them running down the stairs in a circular way, we are able to focus on some of the characters’ identically twisted minds.

As a physical object, the staircase determines one of the major structures of the house, the dominant cinematographic space of the film (and which gives the title to the movie). Through it, we also fear that it is the place of all dangers, anticipating loss of balance and falling. In one of the scenes in the film, we see, in reflection in a mirror on the wall, Helen climbing the stairs. As she stops in front of the mirror, she puts her hands on

her neck, moves her lips, mimicking the ability to speak, and watches her own image. At this point, the (almost) subjective eye of the camera goes slightly to the right, and while focussing on Helen's attraction to the mirror, it shows an unidentifiable figure hiding in darkness behind a statue. The camera then provides a close-up of the wide and psychotic eye of this figure (in the same way as described above) – an eye which, acting in its own way as a mirror, reflects the mirror image of Helen. The eye reflects a slightly different image, however: Helen's mouth is effaced. This particular image of the girl lacking her mouth seems to come straight from *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), a seventeen-minute silent surrealist film by Spanish director Luis Buñuel in collaboration with Salvador Dalí, which uses dream logic in narrative flow and speculating on the then-popular Freudian free association. The scenes were extremely provocative (it was designed to deliver a revolutionary shock to the hated bourgeois society), particularly the first ones in which we see a woman's eye being slit open with a razor (fig. 88), while an identical reflection of a cloud obscures the moon.



Figure 88. *Un Chien Andalou*

The bars of the railings projected on the walls further accentuate the threatening dangers that reign in the house, and in the end entrap the young mute girl and isolate her from the rest of the world. The particulars of *mise-en-scène* and lighting create here a host of other implications. The effacement of the mouth is a mark of castration, but a quite different castration from the one I have described above with Chris Cross in *Scarlet Street*.

While Cross implicitly acknowledges his castration by portraying Kitty's larcenous selling off of his artworks (through signing them in her own name), Helen's castration is specific to the woman in relation to the symbolic order of language – a signifying system she is deprived of. Her own reflection in the mirror is realistic and mimetic, in other words, the sign maintains a matching association with its object. The reading of the unidentified eye is however symbolic. It introduces a form of stylisation which makes it less natural, and yet it does not lose its truth. Instead, the killer's gaze constructs another order of truth in which absence is totally significant. The same eye that serves as a mirror of femininity is the one that in some way provokes violence.

With the cinematic signifier, Christian Metz embraces the metaphor of the screen as mirror, and places the roots of the cinema in the unconscious. To explain his argument, Metz uses psychoanalysis to disclose three specific areas: mirror identification, voyeurism and exhibitionism, and fetishism. While I have already discussed the topic of voyeurism, mirror identification is, in Metz's words, in a close relation with fetishism. The mirror reflects everything but the spectator, yet he or she corroborates in the unity and identity of the imagery. For one reason, film theory has resolutely linked cinema with the registering of the imaginary, from Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis and semiotic theory to Metz's description of the cinematic signifier as imaginary. Moreover, Metz observes that cinema involves the senses, as it:

(...) is *more perceptual* (...) than any other means of expression; it mobilises a larger number of the axes of perception (that is why cinema has sometimes been presented as a "synthesis of all the arts"; (...) it is true that cinema contains within itself the signifiers of other arts: it can present pictures to us, make us hear music, it is made of photographs, etc.). (Metz 1982:43)

But cinema shows itself as being totally absent from the perceptions it creates. The person seen or the sound heard cannot be found outside the screen. The relationship between the spectator and the image, justified in an absence, is defined by the attraction and fascination of presence. When associated with the woman in *The Spiral Staircase*, that absence is a reason for murder. This type of violence present in the film is the mirror of narcissism in cinema, about which Lacan affirms: "Aggressivity is the correlative tendency of a mode of identification that we call narcissistic, and which determines the formal structure of a man's ego and of the register of entities characteristic of his world" (Lacan

1966:85). Helen relates only to the image being reflected and the film expresses a considerable deviation between two readings of that image (one male, the other female). Thus, the narcissism of the imaginary relation consists in its twofold nature, and consequently a sign of confrontation in the triangular structure of the symbolic. Hence too Lacan's association of aggressivity with narcissism, primary identification, and the imaginary.

Many *noir* films allude to the symbology of the staircase, both as a means of entrapment or as an enhancement of the feeling of vertiginous descent, as is the case of Chris Emery (Rita Hayworth) in *Affair in Trinidad* (1952) in the figure below (fig. 89). The staircase she descends is presented in a pattern of crosscut lines, with shadows, striped ropes, and other decorative elements. To a great extent, it is similar to a spider web, with Hayworth, the archetypal spider woman, rising from the centre, as Silver and Ursini point out. She throws an ill-omened "shadow on the wall to her right, a distorted silhouette which further enhances the feeling of threat and doom". Her pose is majestic "as she places her left hand on the handrail and throws her bare shoulders back, as if consciously waiting" (Silver & Ursini 1996:96) for the pose to be fixed in photograph or painting. Her long white scarf waves down the stairs in front of her like a bride. The background décor is also extremely well-selected to underscore this ambiguity: the wall painting shows intertwined figures and the primitive dancing woman that forms the base of the lamp on the telephone table underscore and unify the topics of "eroticism and feminine control".



Figure 89. *Affair in Trinidad*

Other examples can be found throughout the work of Hitchcock. In the last sequence of the *noirish* *Vertigo* (1958), we see the stairwell of a church bell tower coils up around Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart), almost like a monster escaped from his unconscious. The same happens with the way L. B. Jeffries (James Stewart) manages to encapsulate the whole world through his *Rear Window* (1954). He does not really observe the exterior from his window, but rather “constructs” other lives through various windows, which give him back the “split screen” projection of his anguishes and rejections.⁹² The numerous fire escape staircases and the one that adorns his own apartment appear to be important coiling structures to help the spectator follow Stewart’s gaze out of his window. In the early *noir* *Shadow of a Doubt*, Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) attempts to murder his niece by rigging a staircase for her to collapse.

⁹² This again brings us back to the particular concept that cinema builds in studios spaces things that are ephemeral and creates in our imaginary solid constructions or fictions. So “in the mode of absence”, as Metz says, the signifier, that is the cinematic image, is thought of as something that stands for something which is absent. The more intensely present the cinematic image appears to make its object, the more it insists that the object existed; or, in other words, the more real cinema seems, the more it reminds us of its unreality.

Staircases in *noirs*, for that matter, appear most of the time as grand stairs, denoting a high point, with steps facilitating theatrical entrances and exits: in the case of *Double Indemnity*, the *femme fatale* appears suddenly, like a vision of loveliness, first on the landing and then on the steps, looking down on the suddenly stupefied man, forcing him to crane his neck forward, to put her on a pedestal (fig. 90). In fig. 89 above, Hayworth sensuously runs her elegant fingers along the handrail, just like Stanwyck as she comes down the stairs in *Double Indemnity*. Whereas in *Sunset Boulevard*, the staircase through which Norma Desmond descends, in imperious silence, provides the setting for a grand entrance (and simultaneously the frustration at not having an audience at the bottom), and so is also a parody of all fake grand entrances (fig. 91). The staircase in Vandamm's house in *North by Northwest* (1959) becomes itself a trap; or, in Guy Haines's secret ascent of the staircase in the Bruno Anthony's household in *Strangers on a Train*, the whole scene invokes memories of Bruno's past. Ascents and descents of stairs are also climactic in *Notorious* (1946).



Figure 90. *Double Indemnity*



Figure 91. *Sunset Boulevard*

However, much of this iconography that appears around the symbols of steps and staircases specifically stamps female protagonists either as *femmes fatales*, and therefore establishing their look and confident manner as such, or, as in the case of *The Spiral Staircase*, as victims, accentuating the suffering of the young women, and consequently heightening her vulnerability in a dangerous world. In any case, as the male protagonist (and the viewer) looks up at the lady descending the stairs, his eyes ascend towards the light, and thus, usually in a posed shot or positioning herself in an elaborately composed posture, the woman on the staircase becomes a representation of a sexualised luminosity or glamour.

In Freudian psychoanalysis, staircases can be connected with sexuality,⁹³ and their use implies physical activation, a rhythmical movement of the body. As Freud wrote in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899):

Steps, ladders, or staircases, or as the case may be, walking up or down them, are representations of the sexual act. (...) It is not hard to discover the basis of the comparison: we come to the top in a series of rhythmical movements and with increasing breathlessness, and then, with a few rapid leaps, we can get to the bottom again. Thus the rhythmical pattern of copulation is reproduced in going upstairs. Nor must we omit to bring in the evidence the linguistic usage. It shows us that “mounting” is used as a direct equivalent for sexual act. (in Runyon 1992:94)

The feminine presence on the staircase further clinches this implied identification: the way the woman sophisticatedly runs her fingers down the handrail, almost like a caress, and finally the balusters that end the handrail are nearly always relevantly phallic (as is the case in *Double Indemnity*, for example).

Back to *The Spiral Staircase*, the “spirality” element of the film augments the terror and the surprise factor in the spectator. It functions fundamentally as a visual element proper to this Gothic context: a man in a black trench coat and wearing gloves is depicted many times as if to impel the viewer to the conviction that he is the culprit responsible for all the violent crimes. Therefore, the kind of sexualised “glamour” that is diffused through the characters walking down staircases in the films above, such as *Double Indemnity* or *Sunset Boulevard*, is transformed into sexual threat in the dark and ill-defined “space” of *The Spiral Staircase*. The stairs lead Helen into the cellar with the sinister feeling that she

⁹³ It is worth noting that the word *klimax* was ancient Greek for “ladder”.

is being followed. In this context, the darkened staircase, only lit by flickering candles, evokes the imagined fears of childhood. Again in Freudian terms, the creepy reaction to being followed up gloomy stairs at night is evocative of the “dark continent”, the metaphor that Freudian psychology used to describe female sexuality and the enigma that lies beneath it, this expressing the castration anxiety of the male who approaches it.



Figure 92. *The Night of the Hunter*

The same strange feeling of malevolence in pursuit is made evident by serial killer Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum), a misogynistic preacher with the word “LOVE” tattooed on the knuckles of his right hand and “HATE” on the knuckles of his left, who is also a terrifying psychopath calling to the children from the top of the stairs (fig. 92) in Charles Laughton’s *noir The Night of the Hunter*. This upsetting and intricate story was designed to have the singular experience of a child’s nightmare, including the difficulty of trying to keep a secret, and it is actually told from the perspective of a child.

The basement sequence in the figure above shows a frightening expressionistic composition casting Mitchum’s huge, terrifying shadow on the wall, as he comes down the

long, wooden staircase while trying to corner the two orphaned children. The scene emphasises the complexity of the twisted Powell's mind both as a psychopath and as a preacher. Mitchum's lunatic oscillation between solicitous care and murderous intent is one of the most powerful achievements of *noir* cinema.

In conclusion, the "spirality" found in *The Spiral Staircase* is indeed the most relevant visual objectification from a metaphorical perspective, more than just a constant movement of characters moving up and down the staircase. In addition, we can see that the staircase establishes a class dimension to the film. Helen circulates in that class "deviation", in the hinterland between gentility and the house servant: she seems to be the only one that uses both the front stairs (the grand ones being used by the family) and the back spiral staircase (only used by the servants and a murderer who needs to move about unobserved). These spiral stairs indicate that her room is part of the servants' quarters; and this apparent physical marginalisation of the governess heroine is then connected to her social status within the household. Moreover, the location of Helen's room on the top floor of the house emphasises her feeling of being confined within a house where she does not belong. The front and back dimensions of the house operate as separate spatial places, just as the upper, the ground and the basement levels do in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).

In a certain way, just like in Gothic-like mysteries, Helen becomes an enigmatic figure, carrying medication and food to an old lady shouting at night in her own room, reminding us of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Indeed, the film's ending, for example, different from the final shot Dinelli scripted, reinforces this view of mystery and enigma. Siodmak used a tracking shot inside the house, pulling away from Helen, who has said something for the first time: "It is I, Helen", she tells a telephone operator. In this final shot, we doubt whether Helen is now in Warren space or still in servant space or whether the spaces have merged into one for her. The camera stays on Helen, still inside this place where no one, not even the audience, is allowed a way out.

2.2.1.4 Conclusion

The Spiral Staircase is often considered a production that spans the period of costume drama genre and *film noir*. In fact, one frequently finds it difficult to preserve this distinction, as the period film, for instance, can also depict such qualities as chaos, alienation, and despair that are characteristic of *film noir*. This difficulty is further emphasised in Robert Siodmak's film in its distinctive vision of dark instability so predominant in the *noir* universe. The mute servant who believes she has witnessed a murder finds herself effectively trapped inside her own silence. Unable to verbalise her fear and knowledge, Helen becomes a victim of near paranoia. Her problems are compounded by her own pre-existing traumas and fantasies, as suggested by the film's mock marriage ceremony. As she becomes the main target of a menacing killer, the film creates a narrative irony as present and as powerful as any *film noir*.

The *noir*-related period films occasionally reflect a world solidly rooted in the iconography of the past. The horse-drawn carriage that draws up in the first images of *The Spiral Staircase* stands as a good example. The film opens with a slightly cloudy sky when Helen is taken into town in a horse and buggy (fig. 93), the means of transport that is normally seen in this type of Gothic productions. On her way back to the Warren mansion, the weather suddenly changes into a severe storm, with howling winds, all providing a dark and terrifying atmosphere, and showing Helen crossing an abandoned backyard, with the gates creaking and slamming, amidst inexplicable noises. We see a man behind the trees, almost like a haunting and frightening spectre (fig. 94) following Helen's movements into the house. The Warren's house then takes on the iconography of the haunted mansion so popular in this category of films. This is the type of mysterious place that foments terror, representing the Gothic scenario of familial disintegration, real and imagined imprisonment, and sexual coercion.



Figure 93. *The Spiral Staircase*



Figure 94. *The Spiral Staircase*

In the same way, we find productions, like John Brahm's *The Lodger* (1944) and Edgar G. Ulmer's *Bluebeard* (1944) which, although very close to the *noir* cycle, are productions characterisable as "Victorian or Gothic films", "atmosphere films," or "period melodramas". They are just as concerned with the decay and corruption found in typical contemporaneous *film noir*. In terms of characterisation, the period film "readjusted" the fatal quality of women that emerged in the *femme fatale* in the *noir* film to be a fatal propensity to arouse the murderous psychotic in men.

The Lodger was originally based on a novel by Marie Belloc-Lowndes, and was adapted by Alfred Hitchcock, who made it an early success in 1927. Hitchcock's version is about an innocent man who is suspected of being a serial killer (in the lineage of the Hitchcockian "wrongly accused man"), whereas John Brahm's presents Laird Cregar (Slade, in this film) as the leading suspect in a string of murders, a perverse character obsessed with beautiful women, whom he murders out of a twisted sense of revenge for his brother and his betrayal by a ruinous woman. John Brahm's success with this initial period production prompted another film utilising the talents of both Laird Cregar and *The Lodger* screenwriter Barre Lyndon. *Hangover Square* (1945) is Brahm's melodramatic vision of controlled chaos and romantic destruction. From a novel by Patrick Hamilton about a young composer, whose lapses of memory conceal the fact that he is a mentally disturbed murderer, Lyndon and Brahm produce a treatment of the mind of an artist unable to master his own sense of inadequacy. *Hangover Square* becomes a frenetic, almost explosive nightmare, which ends in the artist's transfigured death amid crumbling debris and enveloping flames. The film is a baroque set-piece and follows the type of filmmaking that parallels the *noir* sensibility, but without its disciplined modernity.

Ulmer's film *Bluebeard* presents a similar story. This time mad Gaston Morel (John Carradine) plays the role of a fine-looking but gloomy painter and puppeteer who strangles his models with a black tie (fig. 95). The scenes this time, however, take place in nineteenth century Paris, with beautiful images of the Seine, into which the murdered young female bodies are dumped by the criminal. We learn in the film that Gaston kills women in order to preserve his artistic creativity but does so under a psychotic compulsion he cannot control. This perverse take on misogyny from Morel's contradictory character shows another part of his idealising act of representation in painting. He gets frustrated and infuriated by the minor imperfections of his source / models (this might remind the viewer

of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark" written in 1843, which analyses obsession with human imperfection, as well as showing the psychological impact it has on sexual relations, and other ethical and philosophical issues of that time), whereas the caricatural nature of puppetry arouses no such compulsions for him.



Figure 95. Bluebeard

These two examples of films show that period films have their themes rooted in dark romantic psycho-sexual narratives. Their directors managed to create an aura of apprehension rendered by the conventions that would become common in postwar *film noir*. Ulmer uses mostly the Expressionistic techniques already described previously, which included oblique camera angles and surreal sets, whereas in the case of Brahm's film *The Lodger*, meticulous attention is given to authentic detail. In any case, these films reinforce the sense of peril that is normally implicit in Gothic productions (and obviously appropriate to the last years of WWII). Douglas Sirk's *Lured*⁹⁴ (1947) deploys the same settings as the ones in *The Lodger*, but this time the narrative viewpoint is inverted as the central figure is a woman Sandra Carpenter (Lucille Ball), a dance hall girl who agrees to act as bait for the London police to catch a psychotic killer who preys on women through

⁹⁴ The title was actually modified to *Personal Column* as the personnel at the Production Code Administration believed that the word "lured" sounded very much like "lurid". Director Douglas Sirk expressed his disagreement many times, considering that the title change would generate much confusion in the viewer's mind. He also eventually admitted that this was one of the main reasons for the film's box office failure at that time.

newspaper personal advertisements. Sandra is asked by the police to answer these newspapers advertisements in the personal columns so as to lure the killer into a trap.

Another unconventional period thriller, which was adapted from a 1939 book by Patrick Hamilton, is George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1944), aka *The Murder in Thornton Square*. The film opens just after world-famous opera singer and entertainer Alice Alquist has been strangled, at number 9 Thornton Square in London. The intention of the killer was to get hold of her jewels, but Paula (Ingrid Bergman), Alice's niece, manages to intercept him. Paula was raised by her aunt after her mother's death, and is then sent to Italy so that she can study music to be an opera star. She studies with the same teacher who once trained her aunt, and stays with him for years trying to forget that terrible night. She then decides to get married to older pianist Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer, playing against type), who convinces her to move back to the old address in London, a house long uninhabited, to overcome her anxieties. She quickly finds herself misplacing small objects



Figure 96. *Gaslight*

or fiddling with the gaslights which makes the rest of the lamps in the house dim slightly, as fig. 96 above shows. The ominous interpretation of the change in light levels becomes

almost part of a game, emphasising the character's deception, all cunningly orchestrated by her own husband to make his wife believe she is losing her sanity.

The film concentrates on processes of psychological torture in a relationship where a husband isolates his wife, leading her to have a nervous breakdown and then menacing her with threats of being interned in an asylum. Charles Boyer as the intimidating husband is like many similar figures in the *noir* world, possessed of a strange, frightening quality typical of the *noir* vision. While *noir* productions were male-oriented but often with menacing male characters too, films of the forties were often concerned about women's madness and the way they were consequently treated and may be interpreted as an analysis of the crisis of gender roles resulting from rapid historical changes (namely as a result of the war and the massive number of women entering the workforce earlier in the decade).

The earliest period films in the *noir* style – *The Lodger*, *Bluebeard*, *Gaslight* – were not greatly concerned with the generalised decay and corruption depicted in typical contemporary *film noir*. Rather these films concentrated on exploiting the mental conflicts and disturbances that afflicted weak personalities separated off from the rest of the society. The nature of the disturbances displayed by actors like Cregar, Boyer, and Carradine appeared to be self-contained, offering unmotivated villainy. The manner in which Carradine's "Bluebeard" is drawn helplessly towards murders; the ritualised washing of the lodger's blood-stained hands in the Thames; Boyer's monomaniacal persecutions of his wife – all are idealisations of evil. Many period films reflect an aura of ever-present evil, balanced by narrative retribution and the restoration of order. The split between good and evil is well defined, creating a moral stability that many *noir* films work against.

An RKO production of an adaptation of Ethel Lina White's novel called *Some Must Watch* - White was a rival of Agatha Christie as a creator of thrillers, most notably of *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) - *The Spiral Staircase* goes well beyond the "realism" of the *noir* world. Some of the ambience of *film noir* is present, but ultimately the nightmarish plot confers a kind of salvation on Helen. The same happens, as seen above, with *Night of the Hunter* because Harry Powell is too concrete a force of evil. In this latter case, it is a period film too precise and absolute in its portrait of evil, yet preserving throughout a strong moral framework. The difference between good and evil is so highly contrasted in Powell (for a start, the words "love" and "hate" are tattooed on his knuckles) that this demented evangelist becomes evil personified and not much more.

The existential angst that thoroughly influenced the *noir* universe after WWII was also present in the period genre or the particular narrative situations found in the past. In films such as *The Spiral Staircase* the directors, as I said above, manage to create an aura of chaos, complicated by a loss of perception and sense of meaninglessness, that rival *film noir* but in not such a focussed form. These period melodramas are permeated (and maybe also influenced themselves) by the concurrent appearance of *film noir*. Therefore, popular *noir* films, such as *Shadow of a Doubt* or *Sorry, Wrong Number*, though diverging somewhat in plot and resolution, also convey the narrative mood of the so-called women's film. The story of the latter, for example, also takes place inside a house with a huge spiral staircase to enhance Leona's (Barbara Stanwyck) self-imprisonment (believing herself to be helpless, she watches the murder's shadow creep up the stairs) and her consequent hysteria.

In short, Gothic melodrama produced uniquely feminine cinematic dramas of suspicion and distrust, based on the recurrent theme of what can be described as the "Don't trust your husband" cycle of films of the forties. It started with Hitchcock's films, namely *Rebecca*, *Suspicion* (1941) and *Shadow of a Doubt* and continued with conventions of the *noir*-related period films such as *Gaslight* in 1944, and *Notorious* and *The Spiral Staircase*, both in 1946. These films exploit certain aspects of *film noir*, notably in terms of visual iconography and narrative structure: the hints of sexual aberration, the intrusions of a mysterious past, and the isolation and the life of a secluded woman, endangered by an older, disturbed man, frequently her husband. And, in all of them, the house (usually a symbol of protection in Hollywood movies), becomes a trap of terror, the ultimate entrapment of the heroine in the old mansion.

2.3 Jacques Tourneur

Born in Paris in 1904, Jacques Tourneur was aged only ten when he moved to the United States with his father, Maurice Tourneur. While both came back to France to produce the film *The Mysterious Island* (1925), Jacques returned to the States having taken American citizenship in 1919. He decided to sign a contract with MGM with whom he stayed until 1941. Acclaimed for his several low-budget horror films, including *Cat People*, *I Walked with a Zombie* (both from 1942) and *The Leopard Man* (1943) – analysed in Part II, p. 129 – Tourneur soon got promoted to the A-list of directors at RKO. This is when his career in *noir* got started with three major productions: *Out of the Past* (1947), *Berlin Express* (1948), and *Nightfall* (1957). These three *noir* films form the core of my analysis in this chapter, with a particular emphasis on *Out of the Past* which, in my view, for its many merits represents one of the key works of *film noir*.

Yet, it was still in 1944 that Tourneur directed his first RKO *noir* film called *Experiment Perilous*. Based on a novel by Margaret Carpenter, this production is reminiscent of *Gaslight*. As I have described above, these female-centred Gothic melodramas were a major part of Hollywood studio production schedules during the forties. They would normally be box-office successes, not only because they were assigned to highly reputed directors, such as Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Siodmak, Orson Welles and Jacques Tourneur, but because they also cast the leading female stars of the day (Ingrid Bergman, Hedy Lamarr, Katherine Hepburn, Joan Fontaine, and Olivia de Havilland).

Experiment Perilous starred George Brent (the killer from *The Spiral Staircase*) and Hedy Lamarr. As Anthony Barker has pointed out, some of these “actresses were put under exclusive personal contracts, like Ingrid Bergman, Joan Fontaine (...) and Jennifer Jones”. Barker also writes about David Selznick and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* arguing that:

Selznick championed the feminised film, the film that was artfully arranged around “female brightness,” in recognition of the fact that his audiences were predominantly female. (...) The vulnerable and embattled female was the protagonist of choice for the 1940s, as represented in Scarlett O’Hara, Mrs Miniver, Mildred Pierce and numberless others. (Barker 2004:51)

Experiment Perilous also contains Gothic *noir* elements in the same vein as *Rebecca*, *Gaslight* and *The Spiral Staircase*, but in my view is far more puzzling and unsettling in the sense that it concentrates on the strange suggestibility and eerie movement of characters suffering from compulsive behaviour. Its opening sequence, taking place on a train (fig. 97), is evocative of Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes*, as Dr. Huntington Bailey (George Brent) encounters and befriends a mysterious older woman Clarissa "Cissie" Bederaux (Olive Blakeney) who offers him her "special brand tea". The film also uses the flashback technique quite extensively. One of the most impressive scenes of the film is a set-piece spectacular gun battle in an aquarium hall, filled with smashed pieces of glass, surging water and floundering fish, prefiguring the end of *The Lady from Shanghai*.⁹⁵



Figure 97. *Experiment Perilous*

Regarding *Berlin Express*, much of its interest rests on the ravishing location photography of Frankfurt. This was the first American production shot in postwar Germany, and it shows a city made up entirely of debris. The film is indicative of the disillusionment that followed World War II, and ultimately reports back to us from the compelling iconography of a destroyed and decaying society. The shot below (fig. 98) shows Robert Lindley (Robert Ryan) teamed up with a group of companions, Sterling (Robert Coote) and Lucienne (Merle Oberon), all US allies, in the overwhelming ruins of an almost totally destroyed postwar Frankfurt. The various reflective surfaces, the grotesquerie contained in the plot, treacherous clowns (one scene involves a fatally wounded man in a clown suit who is trying to pass on fundamental information in front of

⁹⁵ This particular sequence would later be imitated in films such as *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Mission: Impossible* (1996), for example.

a laughing audience), and broken ladder rungs are all tropes that further emphasise the decay and corruption of the *film noir* sensibility.



Figure 98. *Berlin Express*

Moreover, the film is filled with ideological messages lying outside the scope of its apparent narrative (the themes of alienation and isolation are much in evidence). The main characters stand for each of the national powers that had a presence in occupied Germany portrayed in the film (the American headquarters of occupied Germany was in Frankfurt). In fact, there is also a tough-guy voiceover narration by Paul Stewart who again and again accentuates the film's ideological message, limiting the spectator to Robert Lindley's consciousness and aligning his vision with that of the United States.

Tourneur's most commercially successful film *noir* was *Nightfall*, based on a novel by David Goodis and starring Aldo Ray as a man (a commercial artist named James Vanning) who is hunted and trapped between two murderous bank robbers who assume that he is holding a bag containing \$350,000 and the police who believe he killed his partner, Dr. Edward Gurston (Frank Albertson). The film again uses flashback as a device to tell this compact story, and on the whole shows a number of important similarities with *Out of the Past*: the establishing of a dualism between present and past and between

country and city, expressed by means of flashbacks; both heroes in the films, James Vanning and Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum), try to escape from their past situation by relocating somewhere else and changing their names; and in both films, the hero tries to defeat his destiny by returning to his previous identity. The major difference though is that unlike Jeff, Vanning manages to maintain his innocence and survives his ordeal.

Perhaps for all these reasons, the film was described by Spencer Selby as “a paranoid thriller which seems to be Tourneur’s return to some of the territory he explored in *Out of the Past*” (Selby 1997:166). On the whole, *Nightfall* benefits from a firm script by Stirling Silliphant, fine performances with some very good dialogues, and superb cinematography by Burnett Guffey, notably his most striking end sequence (the film ends with the loot bag sitting on those bright snow-covered mountains of Wyoming – fig. 99) that possibly provided a clue for the ending of the Coen brothers’ *Fargo* (1996).



Figure 99. *Nightfall*

Despite being released towards the end of the *noir* cycle, *Nightfall* continues to stress the predicament of the *noir* protagonist, his paranoia about current events and how much he is a victim of an implacable fate. These key extended flashback sequences explain the reasons for Vanning’s present situation, reflecting his struggle to make out how such

violent mishaps could have led to his convoluted present dilemma: being pursued both by the law and two dangerous criminals: John (Brian Keith) and Red (Rudy Bond), who believe he has their loot. The usage of striking juxtapositions and tones recalls the narrative structure of *Out of the Past*, which explains the causal incidents by means of a flashback halfway through the film. However, there are some obvious differences between these films. While in *Nightfall* Vanning is basically innocent of any wrongdoing, Bailey in *Out of the Past* is clearly not, and the trap into which Vanning has fallen can only be understood as impersonal or deterministic, not retributive, as is the case for Jeff Bailey, whose complicity in his shadowy past inescapably leads to his downfall.

Even though his *noir* filmography is not as extensive as that of the other *film noir* directors I have analysed so far, Jacques Tourneur managed to produce an artwork which is one of its finest expressions. His general contribution to cinema history, and specifically to the *noir* cycle, still appears to be underappreciated, in my opinion. *Out of the Past* (aka *Build My Gallows High*), merits the utmost attention for its appearance at the high-tide of *noir* in 1947.

2.3.1 *Out of the Past* (1947) and Obsession?



Directed by Jacques Tourneur

Produced by Warren Duff

Written by Daniel Mainwaring

Starring Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer, Kirk Douglas, Rhonda Fleming, Richard Webb

Photography by Nicholas Musuraca

Music Score by Roy Webb

Costume Design by Edward Stevenson

Film Editing by Samuel E. Beetley

In January 1947, Jacques Tourneur had the opportunity to work again with producer Warren Duff, the producer of *Experiment Perilous*. Based on a novel entitled *Build My Gallows High* by Daniel Mainwaring, under the pseudonym of Geoffrey Homes (James M. Cain also wrote two drafts, but contributing little for the final film), *Out of the Past* is a title evocative of the *noir* cycle in general as well as descriptive of this particular film. It should also be noted that by the time *Out of the Past* appeared, Mainwaring had decided to concentrate exclusively on screenwriting and wrote a number of key *noir* and B-films, such as William C. Thomas's *They Made Me a Killer* (1946), Don Siegel's *The Big Steal* (1949 - a chase melodrama set in Mexico that was made by RKO to profit from the success of *Out of the Past* by teaming its two stars, Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer, with the same writer), Joseph Losey's *The Lawless* (1950), Ida Lupino's *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953), or Felix Feist's *This Woman Is Dangerous* (1952), to cite but a few.

Mainwaring started his writing career as a newspaper reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. His past experience as a private detective and the high amount of newspaper articles he wrote on urban crime made him decide to concentrate on detective fiction during the golden age of the pulps. Just like a member of the hard-boiled school of

writers like Dashiell Hammett (who, as seen above, had also used his direct experience as a private eye to give his *Black Mask* thrillers a sense of authenticity), Mainwaring published his first crime novel, *One Against the Earth* in 1933, under his real name. Since then, this productive author used the pseudonym Geoffrey Homes on all of his novels and the majority of his screenplays.

Dick Powell, who was previously known for light comedies and musicals and only later on for his *noir* production *Murder, My Sweet*, was originally announced to star in the role of the doomed detective hero, but it was Robert Mitchum who eventually played the part of protagonist Jeff Bailey. In fact, both Dick Powell and John Garfield turned down the part (it is also believed that Tourneur had asked Humphrey Bogart to play the lead character in the film but he simply had to refuse as Warner Bros would not loan him out to RKO), and so this became Mitchum's first starring role.

Regarding acting and performances styles, Tourneur's *Out of the Past* is receptive to this approach as it contains a superb trio of actors who became iconic symbols, but also because of their capacity for character adaptation. First, Robert Mitchum's gloomy affinity with tragedy is well-adjusted to the plot and is defining in this film. Mitchum's sad-eyed expression seemed to be ideal for the world-weary defeatist Jeff Bailey he plays. Apparently, the kind of disdain that Mitchum expressed for acting was conceived as a crafty stratagem – one only needs to note the way he inflects the smallest moment with ironic longing, or the way he invests smoking a cigarette with multiple interpretations. Mitchum can be both hero and villain (just like George Brent in *The Spiral Staircase*, or his role in Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter*, or Joseph Cotten in *Shadow of a Doubt*, and so many others) and in this film he plays one of his greatest roles (he was often underrated as an actor), that of a convincingly cynical private eye. Fujiwara underlines the actor's ability to get across emotions:

His talent lies in total self-absorption in the scene, his ability to convey emotion and urgency with the subtlest means, a glance, for example, or by a change in the tone of his voice. His acting (...) has strong affinities with Tourneur's direction. The quality that Tourneur particularly prized in [him] is the ability to show that [he is] listening. (Fujiwara 1998:138)

Second, Jane Greer's place among *noir*'s greatest *femmes fatales* is established in *Out of the Past*, in her compelling characterisation of Kathie Moffett. This role alone (when she was just 22 years old) has made her an important *noir* actress and indeed she is

at the core of the mystery of the film, which is stressed by the fact that she is initially absent from the film (she is spoken of early in the film but is not seen until the story is well advanced). She was placed under contract by Howard Hughes in 1944, and soon after by RKO, where she eventually became one of the studio's leading actresses and starred with Robert Mitchum in two classic *noirs*: Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (she would appear again in a neo-noir version of the film called *Against All Odds* by Taylor Hackford in 1984) and Gross's *The Big Steal*, and another (minor) *noir* film entitled *They Won't Believe Me* (1947) directed by Irving Pichel and starring Robert Young. Her contribution to the *noir* cycle may not be that imposing but the term "*film noir*" normally brings her name to mind on account of her ability to interpret the role of *femme fatale*. In her own words, Jane Greer recalls:

When I first signed at RKO, I darkened my hair. And dark hair makes you look a bit sinister on the screen. Consequently, every part I got was "the other woman". Finally, I'd been there for years when a producer, Joan Harrison, wanted me for a normal person. RKO said, "She plays a heavy". But Joan told them I'll fix it, and she lightened my hair. Suddenly, I looked human. But I did have a hard time moving away from that "other woman image". (in Fitzgerald 2002:72)

Finally, third and perhaps most crucially, actor Kirk Douglas, who had the rare privilege of starting his movie career with a reasonably important part in Lewis Milestone's *noir* film *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, where he plays Barbara Stanwyck's weak husband. In Hollywood, Douglas was instantly stereotyped as an antihero, typically a bully, and frequently a villain. This is the case in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, where he acts as Walter O'Neil, a weakling alcoholic; in *Out of the Past*, in the role of gambler / mobster Whit Sterling; and then, *I Walk Alone* (1948), a *noir* film where he was teamed with Burt Lancaster in the role of Noll "Dink" Turner, the owner of a swanky nightclub during the Prohibition era, and which sets up ideological oppositions: Lancaster is a former criminal but a devoted friend with a code of honour (as a good bootlegger); Douglas, by contrast, is socially correct but untrustworthy and crooked (behind a corporate shield).

Douglas has had a full career on screen and became notorious for his sense of independence. His participation in *Champion* (1949), a true revelation in Hollywood (and often considered a *noir* film), marked the beginning of the actor's total autonomy, and in that film he plays Michael "Midge" Kelly, an egocentric boxer. Later in 1951, he acted as

Chuck Tatum, a cynical, frustrated journalist who stops at nothing to get back a job on a major newspaper in *noir* film *Ace in the Hole* (p. 235). Douglas's stardom cannot be limited to just this list of films but extends across a distinguished 40-year career. Yet, these examples of *noir* films allowed him to firm up the tough-guy image that became synonymous with the actor's screen persona.

Most importantly, returning to *Out of the Past*, the movie is representative of the second phase of *film noir*'s classic period in the years immediately after World War II, as its leading theme, as I show later, is elaborated out of a sense of a dark, inescapable past. By 1947 films such as *Body and Soul*, *The Locket*, *Nightmare Alley*, and *Dead Reckoning* (all from 1947) had developed a particularly *noirish* vision of the antihero being caught in a web of events related to his past.

The plot of *Out of the Past* is especially multifaceted and consequently rather complex. Jeff Bailey runs a gas station in the small town of Bridgeport, California, with the assistance of a mute boy (I will come back to the meaning of "muteness" here), Jimmy (Dickie Moore). In a tender moment by an idyllic lakeside setting, involving Jeff and his fiancée Ann (Virginia Huston), Jeff tells her, through a flashback, that he used to be a New York-based private detective named Jeff Markham. Hired by a powerful racketeer named Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas), Jeff is requested to find Sterling's mistress, Kathie Moffett (Jane Greer), who had shot Sterling and got away with \$40,000. Jeff flies to Mexico and falls in love with her and comes to believe her claim that she did not steal any money. They both move to California and live there until Jack Fisher (Steve Brodie), Jeff's former partner, tracks them down. Kathie kills Fisher and flees, causing Jeff to discover that she had lied about the money. We are then sent back to the present time of the narrative, and we see Jeff assuring Ann that he does not love Kathie anymore.



Figure 100. *Out of the Past*

This particular image of Bridgeport, where the camera catches the couple in a tender moment by a peaceful lakeside, is the actual location of the movie. We might note about *noir* films that they are usually not shot on location but instead prefer to use studio backgrounds and other artificial settings. Most of the Bridgeport we see is the real place, which contributes to a different inflection of the theme and a heightening of the mood of the film. Thus, the opening scenes of the film, with this idyllic scenery and low-key lighting, suggest that *film noir*'s most iconic images need not be its darkest. The first glimpse of Jeff Bailey in these pastoral, bucolic scenes accentuate his new immersion in the landscape, as a way of constructing visual alternatives to the dark alleyways, blind corners, and expressionistic shadows.

However, in the same sequence of scenes, the spectator understands that all is not well when Bailey's expression turns to a perpetual frown as a sign of uneasiness. In the scene above (fig. 100), his body is pushed back in the two dimensions of the frame against a leafless weather-beaten tree trunk. Their smiling faces become troubled and pensive with Jeff's remarks about his past, contrasting with the clear open waters of the lake, its promising vastness, and the mountains in the background as a symbol of a natural retreat, but one which cannot be reached. According to *film noir* convention, a retreat or escape to the countryside is either unfeasible, disenchanting, or ill-fated. As their conversation goes

on, Ann, who represents his hope for a future life, steadily feels threatened. She asks him several questions and he gives her mainly vague answers, thus establishing the mystery that veils his character. The camera moves slightly away from them both only to make the contrast between their disquiet with the peaceful scenery, emphasising Jeff's laconic and lethargic look.

The existential figure of the secretive Jeff seems to mirror the mystery of the plot itself. The viewer is constantly unsure of Jeff's feeling and intentions until the very end, as I show later. The narrative is organised in such a way that we cannot truly make out the many different places Jeff has been to ("one too many," as he tells Ann) or the reason why Joe Stefanos (Paul Valentine) has decided to come to Bridgeport. All these explanations are unknowable until the flashback. Nevertheless, the kind of displacement in terms of points of view in the film (especially the switch that occurs from a subjective viewpoint – that of Jeff while he is with Ann – to an objective one – when he is in front of Whit's mansion in fig. 106) coincides with Jeff's entrapment and heightens even more the narrative confusion.⁹⁶

The Kid Jimmy, who works for Jeff at the station, also seems to be elusive. He does not have much influence on the plot; however, in a secondary role he manages to fill a gap in "the circuit of language and information", as Fujiwara notes. Although mute, the Kid establishes a limit to the flow of information and speculation that goes on throughout *Out of the Past*. Just like Helen in *The Spiral Staircase*, he is deprived of a voice thereby compellingly signifying the act of enforced repression. The film opens with Joe Stefanos asking him "Where's Bailey?" (the question seems to insist upon the multiple locations the main character has been to), and from this beginning to the very end (as I will show in the conclusion of this chapter) the Kid is a figurative presence, so to speak, showing the audience that "we are in a labyrinth of reciprocal false communications - the world of *film noir*" (Fujiwara 1998:142).

Ultimately, the final act of entrapment (this time both physical and psychological) is that of the hero, expressed by malign fate: "My timing was a few minutes off", Jeff says sorrowfully to Petey (Wallace Scott), the taxi driver in San Francisco, after coming from the apartment building where he found Eels (Ken Niles) dead. Chris Fujiwara shares the

⁹⁶ Tourneur once commented that "The script was very hard to follow, and very involved; often in this type of film the audience is deliberately confused, because if your story becomes too pat then it's often dull" (Fujiwara 1998:141).

same view about Jeff's fate and also elaborates about the traumatic force that time (the past) plays in the film:

The story of *Out of the Past* is less that of a man in the thrall of a malevolent destiny than that of a man whose timing is off, who suffers a discrepancy between his personal time and the time of actual events. The switch in the title from *Build My Gallows High* to *Out of the Past* reflects this displacement of emphasis (with its corresponding philosophical shift). The original title denotes an irresistible destructive power. The changed title indicates an unwelcome movement across time and locates the central drama in the confrontation with the past. (Fujiwara 1998:145)

2.3.1.1 Modes and Subverted Uses of the Flashback

Although this is not always the case, the flashback in *film noir* is usually a narrative device used to recall images of an inexorable fate. In *Out of the Past* this narrative device assumes several contours. The first of these stages what has already occurred in the past life of Jeff Bailey and helps us reconstruct the primary narrative so as to understand how and why he has ended up hiding in that small town running a gas station with the help of a devoted deaf teenager. Through the first confessional flashback, characterised by the protagonist's retrospective examination, Jeff addresses Ann. Yet, very often in *noirs* the flashbacks can be self-directed or self-addressed (see p. 189), and as in this film, they can be extensive - occupying nearly the entire film, as is the case of *The Killers*. In its classic form, the haunting and obsessive past of the *noir* characters is narrated to the spectator by interrupting the present flow of the film narrative and entering the subjective world of the protagonist. The quest for an answer to an enigma from the past involves a mental process which in turn relates to the subjectivity of consciousness. In this type of confessional flashback the temporal order gets reversed, emphasising even further the subjective realm. In this scene, Bailey starts relating his troubled past to Ann by means of a long flashback. He starts at the point in the story about three years earlier when his name was Jeff Markham and when he was working as a private detective in crime-ridden New York City, working with Jack Fisher, the partner he would refer to as a "stupid, oily gent".

This kind of temporal manipulation creates a curious durational effect on the viewer. In an overlapping of the present by the past, the emphasis is placed on the subjective sphere of the main protagonist, and, in this particular case, by a shift in *mise-en-scène*. In fact, this confessional flashback marks off the past as separate and of a very different social order. The crosscutting change of scenario not only provides a different durational span to the line of action, it also accentuates the hiatus and Bailey's muted denunciation that is observed in the subsequent scenes.

Siodmak's film *The Killers* is a representative example of this complex treatment of time in *film noir*. In fact, about half of the film is unfolded through eleven fragmented and disconnected flashbacks, following a technique perfected in *Citizen Kane*, back in 1941 (a structure adapted from the "rosebud" enigma in that film). However, they are different in form as they attempt to disentangle the intriguing mystery of the character's submission, of his almost indifferent acceptance of death which amounts to a consenting to its appropriacy, when he is hunted down by two hired gunmen in a small-town rooming house. In this way, the pressure that the past exerts on the present reveals the story in a disjointed fashion, with only pieces of the puzzle and clues, rather than concentrating on the personal perspectives of the main protagonist as most flashbacks do. A close adaptation of Hemingway's short story, the search into the dead character's past (which is not evoked in the short story) is thus used as a form of narrative expansion.

The fact that the flashbacks are all scattered throughout the narrative, with flashbacks within flashbacks, has a crucial impact on both the mood and the meaning of the story. As the insurance company officer uncovers bits and pieces of Swede's death (the only clue he has is an insurance policy that the victim left benefitting a cleaning lady in an Atlantic City motel), the narrative begins to move into the *noir* world as the investigator tries to reconstruct the story of the dead man's enigmatic and troubled past, and to understand the reasons for the Swede's passive acceptance of his death. The last flashback is narrated by Kitty Collin, the *femme fatale* who sets Swede up as the decoy in a double double-cross. By skipping over some vital elements related to her own part in the treacherous scheme, she emphasises her duplicity in the film, and this in conjunction with the many different conflicting points of view all delay the revelation of the truth until the very end of the film maintaining for the longest possible time the enigma around the two main characters.

In *Out of the Past*, former detective Jeff Markham, like Swede, cannot escape the claims of the past. Unlike the traditional hard-boiled detective story where the reader discovers the action through the perceptions of a detective, who remains an observer of the action, Jeff loses this position as, when we first see him, he has already abandoned his detective role, which he formerly assumed only in a compromised manner: he is disloyal to his client, Whit (Kirk Douglas), by falling in love with Kathie (Jane Greer) and concealing her from him. Out of the past comes one last assignment, a job that he knows is dangerous but also unavoidable. On the way to his fatal meeting with the ruthless gangland czar, Whit Sterling, he calls on his new fiancée and discloses his past, by means of an extensive flashback. Like that of Swede, his fall from grace in his “other” life resulted from his infatuation with a woman, Kathie Moffett. Then, the deals that follow between Whit and Jeff, like the narrative flashbacks, only serve to fail to undo the past (namely, when Kathie shoots Whit, or to get hold of the incriminating tax records, to blame Kathie for the death of Jeff’s ex-partner, etc).

Reconstructing the past in fragments containing contradictory information, dramatising the impact of the past on present action through the means of flashbacks is, from a semiotic perspective, a way of asking the spectator to gauge the action represented on the screen in relation to an overall judgement which is concurrently present with the action. In standard gangster films, the straightforward, third person approach to the action asks us to project the end of the film (the death of the gangster, as we have seen in Chapter 1.2 of Part II) in the action he sequentially institutes. In the case of *Out of the Past*, as in the other archetypal *noirs*, like *The Killers* or *Citizen Kane*, the leaps back into the past only reinforce its elusiveness, and the *film noir* hero, in contrast to the gangster, not only appeals to us through first person address, but speaks from a point where the action has nearly or already reached its end, with its painful consequences laid bare.

The flashback structure, therefore, permits us to underline various elements. Sometimes they might be perceived as a way of confusing the viewer with their multiple categories of image status (dream, memory, reality) or by interrupting the continuity of the primary narrative, but in fact they also require our power and concentration to explain and identify visual and verbal references, thus complementing missing information. Regardless of the coherence of what appears on the screen, the viewer will instinctively shape it into a representation of something familiar to him or her. In this regard, the several clues that are

brought forward by the characters of *The Killers*, for example, during the numerous flashbacks help us complement the missing pieces that lead to new testimonies. The green silk handkerchief that was found by Swede's body and first mentioned by Jim Reardon (Edmond O'Brien) and held by him is seen repeatedly in several flashbacks as a metonymic prompt for Kitty's influence. Swede is in fact identifiable by this "unusual green handkerchief" with gold harps, which is blown beguilingly to the audience long before we have a chance of making sense of it.

For all these reasons flashbacks are considered to be more than just the structure of the narrative in these *noir* productions; oftentimes, they are referred to as constituting the enigmatic *texture* of the film due to the various functions they perform: the fact that the primary narrative is virtually completed and explained by the expanded incursions into the past of the *noir* hero, allowing the viewer to reconstruct the plot and understand what has occurred and especially the factors that have led the protagonist to be in the present situation. They hence contribute to a quest for an initiating event or cause as well being related to the investigative process itself.

Specifically in *Out of the Past*, they permit the confrontation of two time-frames which in this case correspond to different and highly contrasted settings and moods (for example, the negative energy of the city invested in the character of Kathie contrasting with that of the country where Ann lives with her family). They thus introduce duality and tension, but simultaneously the "intrusion" of the past may engender a new chain of events, often on a recurring, almost cyclical basis. Moreover, the flashbacks of this film concentrate on a certain subjectivity, thus making us share intimacy with Jeff Bailey and benefitting emotionally from the identification processes. While narrating his past to his country girlfriend, the audience tends to trust Jeff because of the confessional and intimist tone of his words. Hence the subversive side of the flashback: the viewer is manipulated into believing a certain chain of events presented by the character or at least he or she is led to favour a biased version of them. This aspect relates to the specificity of cinematic point-of-view, as what is filmed infrequently matches with the perspective of the narrative voice enunciating the flashback. In Tourneur's film, moreover, the motivations of the main protagonist depend upon the circumstances in which the flashback is narrated.

2.3.1.2 The Split Screen Effect: Mise-en-Abyme

Apart from the use of numerous flashbacks, *Out of the Past* is also interpretable in terms of “frames” and the “framing” of Kathie. The issue is raised when Jeff sees Kathie for the first time, which bears out Whit’s earlier remark: “I just want her back; when you see her, you’ll understand better”. In fig. 101 below, we see her through the protagonist’s eyes, as he memorably describes, through a flashback, his first encounter with the seductive *femme fatale*.



Figure 101. *Out of the Past*

Dressed in white and showing a sensual silhouette as she crosses a sunlit plaza in Acapulco (contrasting with the dark cantina she enters), she seems surrounded by an aura of illusion reinforced by the sunlight that shapes her. Jeff, who has just awakened from a doze at his table, is hypnotised and smitten: “And then I saw her, coming out of the sun, and I knew why Whit didn’t care about that forty grand.” All these attributes are then reflected back at her from the masculine world of brutal financial power, exemplified by the appropriately named Whit Sterling. Still in an enthralled voiceover, Jeff tells Ann that he immediately fell in love with Kathie and tells her that he simply was so happy that the Acapulco telegraph office was closed that day he wanted to wire Whit about him having

found Kathie: “I was glad it was and I suddenly knew why.” From their very first encounter, they begin a wilful process of forgetfulness about each other’s past:

Kathie: You know, you’re a curious man.

Jeff: You’re gonna make every guy you meet a little bit curious.

Kathie: That’s not what I mean. You don’t ask questions. You don’t even ask me what my name is.

Jeff: All right, what’s your name?

Kathie: Kathie.

Jeff: I like it.

Kathie: Or where I come from?

Jeff: I’m thinkin’ about where we’re going.

Kathie: Don’t you like it in here?

Jeff: I’m just not ready to settle down.

Kathie: Shall I take you somewhere else?

Jeff: You’re going to find it very easy to take me anywhere.

That night they decide to leave the bar and go and play the game of roulette. The scene is rather gripping as we watch Kathie laying down huge sums of money on each spin of the wheel. Metaphorically, the roulette wheel is a powerful signifier. The risk and the chance factor that is associated with the game are then transposed to the characters’ lives in the film. The abandonment of prudence and self-control expressed through the imagery of such metaphors is a feature of various *noirs*, such as *The Big Sleep*, a film that focuses on the world of illegal gaming which Philip Marlowe investigates and which insists on the dark imagery of risk-taking (“like the diamonds on a roulette layouts”). The same is true in the *noir* production *The Shanghai Gesture* by Josef von Sternberg. Poppy (Gene Tierney) initially reacts to Mother Gin Sling’s (Ona Munson) gambling house with an open and natural disdain, “What a witches’ Sabbath (...) so incredibly evil. I didn’t think such a place existed except in my own imagination – like a half-remembered dream. Anything could happen here at any moment.”, or additionally with the gaming context in *Gilda*’s Buenos Aires. Indeed, the casino at the jazz clubs and the roulette game are a key marker of *noir* fatalism. As a critical game of chance, the roulette that Kathie plays can be regarded as a significant polysemic image.

In the theorisation of the image Roland Barthes argues that the image can be shared with other signs, including linguistic signs as it has the property of being open to multiple significations, thus making it characterised by polysemy. In this particular scene, in which Kathie tries her luck, the image of the spinning roulette wheel suggests another “reading”

transposing the idea of the game into that of the mystery of the unknown. In this regard, this image reminds us of the concept of *anchorage*, as suggested by Barthes in “Rhetoric of the Image”, which basically functions as a way to guide the viewer through the several possible significations of a visual representation. It is normally an adjunct to captions of photographs or written materials in a film, but the whole objective is indeed to anchor some (extra) meaning and to “fix the floating chain of signifieds.” In *Out of the Past*, the motif of gambling appears rather frequently whether it be at race tracks, Whit playing poker, or Jeff and Kathie at the roulette table. These games of chance lay bare the aspirations of these characters that no matter how slim a chance there is, the desire to risk everything is worth it for a moment of pleasure.

To a great extent, the concepts of polysemy and anchorage lead us to another signifying practice, that of “reflexivity”, as proposed by Berthold Brecht. As Robert Stam notes, the concept started to be used in philosophy and then psychology, where it initially referred to “the mind’s capacity to be both subject and object to itself within the cognitive process, but was extended metaphorically to the arts to evoke the capacity for self-reflexion of any medium or language” (Stam 1992:204). The concept draws attention to the narrative and aesthetic principles underlying the text. From this, a full set of devices can be identified in visual semiotics: from strategies of fracture and interruption to discontinuity; in other words, they openly display the codes of its construction.⁹⁷

Moreover, the other meta-cinematic devices that arise from this notion of “reflexivity” such as frame-within-a-frame and the film-within-a-film clearly include the concept of *mise-en-abyme*, that is, “the infinite regress of mirror reflections to denote the literary, painterly or filmic process (...)” (Stam 1992:205). The following scene (fig. 102) from *Out of the Past* shows Kathie at Whit’s house lighting up a cigarette. The viewer sees Jeff who is spying on Kathie. As she walks past the mirror, her image is projected several times as an infinite sequence.

⁹⁷ In this spirit, Brechtian theatre is defined as having no sets, no costumes and actors who would come in and out of their characters as soon as they entered or left the area designated as “stage,” all as a means or a style that relied on the reflective detachment of the audience rather than the atmosphere or the context of production and action.



Figure 102. *Out of the Past*

In this regard, this scene stresses the meaning of *mise-en-abyme* as the reduplication of images, terms, or concepts referring to the textual whole. This particular passage, for example, plays out in miniature the processes of the filmic text as a whole, or, to put it slightly differently, it is a play of signifiers within a filmic text, of sub-texts mirroring each other. This French expression describes the visual experience of having an image reflected infinitely to the extent of rendering the meaning almost impossible or at least making it very unbalanced. As already noted with the female protagonist of *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* (p. 290), many *noirs* use mirrors as foregrounded objects to reflect the dual personalities of the protagonists or to emphasise their own destructive sides.

Orson Welles's *The Lady from Shanghai* is for me one of the most emblematic examples of mirroring the diegesis in *mise-en-abyme*. The scene below (fig. 103) is taken from the Funhouse in an amusement park, in a room composed of mirrors, in which Elsa Banister (Rita Hayworth) tries to convince O'Hara (Orson Welles) of her innocence.



Figure 103. *The Lady from Shanghai*

In the subsequent scene (fig. 104), she dies violently together with her crippled husband after they shoot one another to death, shattering mirror after mirror, false image after false image, man and wife unable to differentiate each other from the countless images each projects and reflects, until they both collapse stained with blood, bullet-torn. The numerous mirrors replicate the many levels of deception and trickery, surrounding and closing in upon the protagonists, until the moment when the viewer cannot tell what is factual and what is false impression. The younger man, the wife's lover (played by Welles himself), a witness to this mutual murder, flees the Funhouse, falling through trapdoors, sliding down ramps, tripping over himself, and running off into the dawn.

Welles works here within an aesthetic matrix that neither the studio tradition nor *film noir* had come up with before 1947. The concept of *mise-en-abyme* is expressed here to its fullest extent, the whole idea being intentionally to confuse and disorient the spectator (the viewer is in fact placed within this dramatic mirror maze), as well as to allow dual feelings of intimacy and infinite regression to exist as spatial and temporal representations.



Figure 104. *The Lady from Shanghai*

While this notion has not always been well understood from the aesthetic or critical points of view, importance must be given to the *mise-en-abyme* as it seems undeniable that certain texts and paintings are self-reflexive, as they explicitly reflect how they are constructed and how they function. The convex mirror used at the rear of Van Eyck's *Marriage of Arnolfini*, in which viewers can see the most remarkable reflections (including Van Eyck's own minuscule self-portrait), I think, stands as perhaps the most famous example of this dramatic urge on the part of the artist.

2.3.1.3 Conclusion: The final (sexual) trap in *Out of the Past*

As seen so far, *Out of the Past* contains most of the important elements that constitute *film noir*, from a definite flashback structure that stresses melodramatic doom to the morally ambiguous atmosphere that envelops character and motive, together with a dark and convoluted plot with double- and triple-crosses by a *femme fatale* and other leading figures, such as the racketeer Whit Sterling. The voiceover is also crucial to the impact of the whole film and the narrative technique is particularly refined in this film, that is, the indirect and gradual way in which information is disclosed by and to the hero. It is almost as if the voice is guiding his journey through the *noir* labyrinth and the viewer shares not only this information but also his ways of absorbing and responding to it.

Soon after leaving the gaming club, a romantic encounter between Jeff and Kathie takes place. They kiss passionately and the light is gradually blocked out like an eclipse (fig. 105). In this particular scene on the beach, we see the couple entangled in the



Figure 105. *Out of the Past*

gracefully draped fishing nets around them. The sexual magnetism that has been built up during and just after the gambling scenes now gives way to the image of the entrapping nets, an anticipation of Jeff being bewitched and serves as a turning point in his destiny. In fact, this extended metaphor underlies Jeff's situation, that of a fish caught in that net. By now, Kathie knows about his true identity and that he had come to bring her back to Whit Sterling:

Kathie: When are you taking me back?
Jeff: Is that why you kissed me?
Kathie: No.
Jeff: Whit didn't die.
Kathie: He didn't?
Jeff: No.
Kathie: Then, why...
Jeff: He just wants you back.
Kathie: I hate him. I'm sorry he didn't die.

Jeff: Give him time.
Kathie: You are taking me back.
Jeff: There's no hurry.
Kathie: I could have run away last night.
Jeff: I'd find you.
Kathie: Yes, I believe you would. You're glad you did?
Jeff: I don't know.
Kathie: I am.
Jeff: There was a little business, about forty thousand dollars.
Kathie: I didn't take it.
Jeff: How did you know it was taken?
Kathie: It's what you meant. I don't want anything of his or any part of him.
Jeff: Except his life.

Therefore, the status of this fragmented tale is suggested not only by the image (ambiguous reality), but also by the clipped dialogues which seem to become more portentous as their relationship evolves. She only comes out to him at night when she “walked out of the moonlight smiling”, with beautiful views of the bay of San Francisco sparkling in Musuraca's splendid contrastive photography. Their meetings follow, and Jeff gradually seems to accept his fate and even embraces it, both physically and spiritually, in a trance-like situation:

I never saw her in the daytime. We seemed to live by night. What was left of the day went away like a pack of cigarettes you smoked. I didn't know where she lived. I never followed her. All I ever had to go on was a place and time to see her again. I don't know what we were waiting for. Maybe we thought the world would end. Maybe we thought it was a dream and we'd wake up with a hangover in Niagara Falls. I wired Whit but I didn't tell him. “I'm in Acapulco,” I said. “I wish you were here”. And every night I went to meet her. How did I know she'd ever show up? I didn't. What stopped her from taking a boat to Chile or Guatemala? Nothing. How big a chump can you get to be? I was finding out. And then she'd come along like school was out, and everything else was just a stone which sailed at the sea.

“We seemed to live by night” certainly conjures up the perfect romantic *noir* mood for these two (and other) protagonists, reminiscent of the refrain which is repeated in Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1951): “I died when she left me; I lived a few weeks while she loved me”. Caught in an abrupt evening rain shower, she invites him for the first time to her cabin where a single lamp, photographed from a low angle, sends out enormous shadows behind them: “It was a nice little joint with bamboo furniture and Mexican gimcracks. One little lamp burned. It was all right. And the rain hammering like that on the window made it good to be in there.” As the light blows over, the room sinks into a shadowy darkness

while the rain falls heavily outside and the wind blows through the open door. Surreptitiously, the camera moves away from them onto the veranda before returning to the room which is now lit only by moonlight, showing that time has elapsed, during which they have made love. This revelatory manifestation has a strange effect of rupture, heightened by the omission of human figures as the camera tracks towards the door and prowls along the woods. The sexuality expressed through the falling rain, the door flying open, the fireworks going off, all preserve the romanticism of these love scenes and most importantly they were a skilful and expressive way to get round the Hollywood Code of that time (p. 138).

When the tranquillity of Bridgeport is left behind, director Jacques Tourneur frames the fateful transition in Markham / Bailey's life by showing his silhouette, back to the mountains ("Remember the mountains?", as Kathie Moffett wistfully asked him once), pass reluctantly through the gate of Sterling's residence overlooking Lake Tahoe, as shown in fig. 106 below. It is during this all-night car trip that Jeff tells Ann about his real name, his past, how he had tracked Kathie Moffett to Mexico and fallen in love with her. We then get to know how he and Kathie left unobtrusively for San Francisco and thought they could live free of the past. We are finally told how the couple was discovered by Fisher and how Kathie had shot him dead, leaving Jeff behind with the body and a bank book revealing she had indeed stolen the 40,000 dollars.

As Ann drives away, we are back in the present, and Jeff walks up the driveway to squarely face his past. Again the scene clearly shows the division between the peaceful mountainous countryside behind Jeff and the mansion's front door with the associations it has, especially of power, greed, and corruption. The picture shows him standing right in the middle of a prisonlike gate, hands in his raincoat pockets, pensive, and his face barely seen through the bars. This significant shot illustrates Bailey's virtual condemnation and the fact that the director shoots him from behind against the estate's steel gate diminishes the protagonist figure, making him look like a powerless prisoner occluded by the imposing bars.



Figure 106. *Out of the Past*

The scenes in San Francisco, involving the murder of Leonard Eels (Ken Niles), the whereabouts of the tax records (one should not forget that income tax papers are the “Maltese falcon” of this movie, so to speak; they are the reason why Jeff was hired by Whit, to recover them from Eels) and the double-cross of Eel’s secretary, Meta Carson (Rhonda Fleming, another victim of the killer in *The Spiral Staircase*). All these scenes take place in rapid succession, maze-like, forcing the characters to find out what truly is going on, as they sense traps from every quarter. Both Bailey and Sterling know that they have been double-crossed, either by Kathie or Meta, but in the end, details (of the excessively complex plotting, notably in the San Francisco section) do not seem to matter in the film.

Regarding locations, *Out of the Past* is extremely rich in its collection of scenes at differentiated places, from Bridgeport, to Acapulco, to New York and San Francisco, and for a short time Los Angeles. While there is a sense that Bridgeport and Acapulco are idyllic places for Jeff and Kathie to escape their criminal life respectively, New York and San Francisco are seen as huge, sprawling American cities, continuously in flux, and both spectacular and sordid at the same time, with all their amazing transformations and their

labyrinth of thwarted dreams. The city of dreams differs very little from the city of reality in *film noir*, in general, and particularly in *Out of the Past*. Indeed, it is worth recalling what Robert Warshow wrote (see p. 173): “there is only the city [for them]; not the real city, but that dangerous and sad city of the imagination which is so much more important, which is the modern world” (Warshow 1972:131). Yet, *Out of the Past* starts and finishes with daylight rural scenes, in vast open spaces, which establishes the whole tone and attitude of the film. However, the *noir* overpowering entrapment remains, especially in the San Francisco section, though the film contrasts it with a new visual scheme that permits the protagonists to breathe freely and suggests their potential liberation.

The sort of love and hate relationship between Jeff and Kathie reminds us of Neff and Phyllis in *Double Indemnity*. Both men come to realise that they are being “played for saps” by their *femmes fatales*, to the point of having Jeff saying to Kathie “You’re like a leaf that the wind blows from one gutter to another.” In any case, it is the aggressive sexuality of these women that deceives the leading male characters of these films, stressing how far the archetype is a male construction, a projection of the vulnerable sensibilities of the protagonists. In these movies, male self-destruction (usually along with that of the woman) is almost always inevitable: In *Double Indemnity*, or *Scarlet Street*, or *Out of the Past*. “Pretending” to accept her plans of leaving with him, Jeff (off-screen) phones the police, knowing that this way he willingly sets in motion the reason for his own destruction. Before they leave Whit’s residence, they have one last drink and reminisce about their past:

Kathie: Jeff, we’ve been wrong a lot, and unlucky a long time. I think we deserve a break.

Jeff: We deserve each other.

While they are both driving down the road, the police set up a roadblock. In the final dramatic sequence of the film, Kathie realises that she has been sold out by Jeff. Because of the censorship imposed by Hollywood’s Hays Office Code of morality, the deceitful couple is forced to discover that crime never pays, that redemption can only be found in their deaths. Like Annie Laurie Starr in *Gun Crazy*, who says “I told you I’m a bad girl, didn’t I?”, Kathie vengefully pulls out a gun and cries to Jeff: “You dirty, double-crossing rat.” While in the novel Jeff is shot by Whit’s men, in the film Kathie shoots him dead in the driver’s seat, firing her gun into his crotch. In the meantime, as in the ending of

Gun Crazy, a barrage of police gunfire causes their car to go out of control and crash into the roadblock.

Jeff cannot escape from his past. In the novel, Jeff says, “They had built my gallows higher and higher.” Back in Bridgeport, Ann asks Jimmy, Jeff’s mute assistant, whether Jeff really wanted to go away with Kathie (“Was he going away with her? I have to know. Was he going away with her?”). The young man nods positively, lying as a way of letting her free herself from Jeff’s memory and eventually from her past and start up a new life with patient and dull Jim (Richard Webb) who still loves her. The film ends with young Jimmy, the Kid saluting the “Jeff Bailey” sign hanging at the gas station door in a subversive manner (the beginning of the film focussed our attention upon this sign: “It’s a small world”, “Or a big sign”). The sign serves thus as a metonymy for the dead Jeff and the muteness of the Kid appositely reinforces the meaning of Jeff’s life, which remains a secret between the Kid – who represents the narrative itself - and the viewer. The Kid walks away towards the mountains in the far background, and turns his back on it (fig. 107), with an inexpressible air of grief-stricken confusion, but perhaps as a way of starting a new life himself.



Figure 107. *Out of the Past*

2.4 Joseph H. Lewis

Considered as an American B-movie director, Joseph H. Lewis is best known for his work in *film noir* from the late forties and the fifties and the way he made notable use of location photography. His creative use of props and of shooting from odd perspectives, and his use of plots and characters with intricate or obscured strategies enhanced their strange power but no less importantly enabled him to face the rather difficult budgetary limitations of B-pictures.

His reputation rests on two major contributions to the *film noir* canon: *Gun Crazy*, a transgressive and boundary-breaching of *l'amour fou* (or mad love, the epitome so often associated with couples on the run) and *The Big Combo*, a striking chiaroscuro film which will be analysed next. As for *Gun Crazy*, it is perhaps the most acclaimed *noir* production directed by Joseph H. Lewis. To recapitulate, this 1950 film stars Peggy Cummins and John Dall (as Annie Laurie Starr and Bart Tare, respectively) in a story about the crime-spree of a gun-toting husband and wife, forerunners of the infamous film duo, Bonnie and Clyde. This dark romance about numerous stick-ups, a dominant *femme fatale*, an erotic love and gun-obsession is also remarkable for its use of location photography. This is a low-budget film with scenes of robberies all across the country filmed largely from the backseat of the holdup getaway car.

This film is one of a trio of *noir* movies that also have this component of *amour fou*, with the flight of a fugitive pair of lovers running from the law: Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937) with Henry Fonda and Sylvia Sydney and Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948) with Farley Granger and Cathy O'Donnell. These films are generally seen as the forerunners to Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) or the prototype for the "couple on the run" sub-genre.⁹⁸ However, in all of these three *noir* productions the main protagonists are either unfairly convicted of a crime (or murder, as is the case for Bowie (Farley Granger) in *They Live by Night*) or are just tempted to criminality by some deadly female, as in the case of Annie Laurie Starr in *Gun Crazy*. In any case, the compulsive

⁹⁸ See chapter 1.2 "The Gangster Film" (p. 72).

characters of *amour fou* and their unstable attitude as fugitives vis-à-vis the society make them classical examples of *noir* themes. In this regard, Luis Buñuel stresses that:

Mad love isolates the lovers, makes them ignore normal social obligations, ruptures ordinary family ties, and ultimately brings them to destruction. This love frightens society, shocks it profoundly. And society uses all its means to separate these lovers as it would two dogs in the street. (in Lo Duca 1968:44)

Raymond Durnat had already provided a short description of the fugitive couples in his “Paint It Black” article, under the category “On the Run”, where he states that:

Here the criminals or the framed innocents are essentially passive and fugitive, and, even if tragically or despicably guilty, sufficiently sympathetic for the audience to be caught between, on the one hand, pity, identification and regret, and, on the other, moral condemnation and conformist fatalism. (Durnat 1970:46)

Durnat fails yet to explain that what basically forces the spectator to show sympathy towards these guilty characters and to identify with the innocent alike is the personality of most fugitive couples and their mad love, which is over-enthusiastic, erotically charged, and going beyond sheer romanticism. It could be argued that the intensity of the relationships in such “love on the run” films is as much romantic as *noir*. That said, what is dark about these movies, principally in the context of mainstream Hollywood, is that one and more often than not both members of the couple die.

Another *noir* drama directed by Lewis is *The Undercover Man* (1949), also known as *Chicago Story*,⁹⁹ as it is just another approach to the subject of organised crime following the conventions of postwar documentary realism explained above (in the line of *T-Men*, *Naked City*, or *House on 92nd Street*). The nature of the unresolved murders in the film, along with Lewis’s eclectic direction, gives this film a very episodic quality. Breaking with the usual sensationalist posture of gangster films, *The Undercover Man* opens with the following text read by a narrator:

In the cracking of many big criminal cases – such as those of John Dillinger, Lucky Luciano and Al Capone, among others – the newspaper headlines tell only of the glamorous and sensational figures involved. But behind the headlines are the

⁹⁹ The timeframe in the film was changed from Prohibition to the postwar era and the city of Chicago practically became an unnamed big city. The film is based on the story of how the Federal Government managed to catch Al Capone on income tax invasion.

untold stories of ordinary men and women acting with extraordinary courage. This picture concerns one of those men.¹⁰⁰

The display of modern technologies evident in the film, inflated with expressionist stylistic touches and the director's own natural penchant for the surreal, are some of the elements which will be found in *The Big Combo*, as I explain next. Like *The Big Combo*, the film is also imbued with sexual allusions, offering an unlikely but potent fusion of fiscal and sexual interest. On the whole, this film dramatises the pursuit of the US Treasury Department of mobster Al Capone for income tax evasion. Glenn Ford plays Frank Warren as both an investigative accountant and a hard-boiled detective, who eventually cracks the Syndicate.¹⁰¹

In Lewis's *noir* filmography there is no doubt that his visual style is what stands out and what established his reputation, along with the distinguished camerawork. For this reason, studio editors would nickname him "Wagon-Wheel Joe", from the fact that he directed inexpensive Westerns and his ability to use wagon-wheels (he would often frame shots through the spokes of a wheel) for constructing fascinating visual compositions within the frame. His films (his *noirs* in particular) are usually very rich atmospherically with lots of suspense which creates both character tension but also adds psychological and sociological depth to his twisted love stories.

Earlier in 1945, Lewis had directed the first of a series of *noir* films with *My Name Is Julia Ross*, a low-budget imitation of Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, released by Columbia that year. In fact, it marks a long association with Columbia and photographer Burnett Guffey and is notable for the opening scene of Julia (Nina Foch) drenched from the rain with her shadow thrown onto the wall of an employment agency. Visually, the Gothic atmosphere of the film with its enormous mansion, a black cat which is always around, an ill-omened staircase, a secret passage, and Julia's room as a prison (fig. 108) all contribute to the film's eeriness and emphasise Julia's state of mind, and tend to keep the spectator just as unbalanced or disoriented as the heroine herself.

¹⁰⁰ See p. 78 about *The Public Enemy* and the disclaimer at the end of the film.

¹⁰¹ Based on an article called "The Undercover Man: Trapped Capone" by Frank J. Wilson, serialised in *Collier's* in 1947.



Figure 108. *My Name Is Julia Ross*

Using various *noir* conventions (namely, the exotic *femme fatale* or the corrupt villainy), *A Lady without Passport* (1950) was shot in a semi-documentary style without having the intricate ethos of true *film noir* of that period. Again the film draws on different stylistic elements and mixes elements of the exotic and tropical adventure with fascinating location footage in Cuba and Southern Florida (the Everglades region) which helps to supply an authentic touch. The final scenes of the film are perhaps the most impressive ones regarding camera movements. These circular camera movements (aerial shots in complete circles of plane / camera which recalls the scenes from *Gun Crazy*) are indeed quite rare in film history.

So Dark the Night (1946) might remind us of some of the films by Fritz Lang, notably *Scarlet Street*. Under comparable budget constraints, Lewis this time tries to recreate a rural French village (with some scenes in Paris as well). His film is yet another endeavour in the *noir* style and it again emphasises his ability to permeate a pastoral setting with *maudit* elements. Lewis required cinematographer Burnett Guffey to apply an atypical visual style using a curious range of deep blacks, depth staging, and shooting

through windows, to provide the indispensable expressionistic touch. Myron Meisel accounts for this distinctive feature of the director's style:

Lewis also displays his penchant for objects in hard focus in the foreground while the action takes place farther back in the frame. The death of the girl's mother is evoked through the metaphor of a dripping faucet and a steaming teapot, our view of them obscured by the clutter of various other kitchen objects. All of these visual devices converge in the stunningly designed climax, in which the complex motifs of framing, objects in the foreground, reprised bells on the sound track, deep focus, mirror images, and ratcheted light are orchestrated to the theme of realization. (Meisel 1975:110)

Henri Cassin (Steven Geray), the renowned detective of the Paris Sûreté, falls in love with an innkeeper's pretty, young daughter Nanette Michaud (Micheline Cheirel), while on an extended long due holiday (his first break after eleven years). One night, Nanette disappears during her engagement party only to turn up dead later. Cassin reckons that Leon (Paul Marion), her old boyfriend, is the suspect for her murder, but soon he is also found dead. The high pressures of his job and the dissatisfactory love affair, with all its implications of *amour fou*, are what has caused Cassin's split personality, which kills when away from his rational mind. This is most evident in the amazing final scene: as Cassin lies dying of a bullet wound on the floor of the inn, he peers through the window (the consistent visual motif of this film) and sees himself as he appeared when he first arrived, as a seemingly unworried man. This image fuses with that of him as a disgraced killer, whereupon Henri smashes the window in a vain attempt to eradicate both of his "reflections". Acknowledging his illness, perhaps for the first time, he exclaims: "Henri Cassin is no more. I have caught him and killed him."

Lewis's visual style and his construction of unusual visual compositions seem to constitute his eccentric approach to his subjects. As seen, the *mise-en-scène* in his films highlights the physical (and often mental) entrapment of his characters, with, for instance, Nina Foch framed behind a barred window (fig. 108) in *My Name Is Julia Ross*; or Peggy Cummins and John Dall, at the rear of a claustrophobic diner with distorted walls that appear to be closing in on them. The *mise-en-scène* and lighting in fig. 109, for example, create a host of implications. One of the bars of the window is sharply reflected across Annie Laurie's face, cutting it into two parts, underlining her split personality. Her facial expression confirms that she will not give up; it is her determination which (she believes)

will set her free. Just like the criminal characters in *The Big Combo*, Annie Laurie struggles for dominance within the frame and within the narrative. In this context, as she waits by a (barred) window with Bart, they are both imprisoned by their environment and behaviour.



Figure 109. *Gun Crazy*

After this distinctive string of *noir* films, Joseph Lewis returned briefly to Westerns with *A Lawless Street* (1955) and the unusual revenge story *Terror in a Texas Town* (1958). He finished his career working in television, directing again mostly Westerns (when the Western genre gradually migrated to television), such as *The Rifleman* (he managed to complete fifty-one episodes alongside other Western specialists, like Sam Peckinpah), *The Big Valley* or *Bonanza*, all of which played to huge TV audiences with great success.

2.4.1 *The Big Combo* (1955) and the New Public Awareness of Organised Crime



Directed by Joseph H. Lewis
Produced by Sidney Harmon
Written by Philip Yordan
Starring Cornel Wilde, Richard Conte, Brian Donlevy, Jean Wallace, Robert Middleton
Photography by John Alton
Music Score by David Raksin
Costume Design by Don Loper
Film Editing by Robert S. Eisen

When *The Big Combo* was released in 1955, *film noir* appeared to be heading for the end of the line with such stylistic excess that there seemed to be nowhere to go. Even Welles's *Touch of Evil*, which rounded out the last of the classic *noir* cycle with his fluidly long take, shot on location and ticking away, ending in the deafening bang of a car bomb, seemed to admit a sense of exhaustion. *The Big Combo* is indeed another example of a gripping low-budget *noir* film, shot in dramatic chiaroscuro with sharp images and shadows captured by *noir* cinematographer John Alton at his best, emphasising the *noir* elements of characterisation, visual style and narrative structure.

The film's opening is just as expressionistic as *Gun Crazy*. Both films start with striking scenes that determine the characters' ultimate defeat and failure and both are sexually defined by the discursive violence of the external world. Lewis opens *The Big Combo* with the high impact of an expressionistic image: this time we see a terrified

woman fleeing from the bowels of a boxing arena, chased by two henchmen. This scene clearly echoes Robert Aldrich's apocalyptic and nihilistic *Kiss Me Deadly* in which we see a pair of naked feet of an attractive girl, wearing only a white trench coat, stumbling and running down a lonely country road at night after having escaped from the nearby lunatic asylum. The fleeing girl in *The Big Combo* is blonde Susan Lowell (Jean Wallace); she desperately tries to run away from the boxing match that Mr. Brown is watching. The viewer soon understands that he is the sinister mob head, and that the plot of the film is the attempt to pin down his secrets which will allow police Lieutenant Leonard Diamond (Cornel Wilde) to break his power and send him to prison. This is what the "big combo" of the film's title is a reference to: Brown's obscure Bollemac Corporation which comprises a network of criminal business interests, and which attracts the attention of detective Diamond.

The complex plotting of the film conceals a simple mission: Lt Diamond's search for evidence against the mob leader which will lead to a conviction. He plays the role of an isolated but incorruptible cop, and his obsessive quest (which nearly leads him to delirium) justifies the close surveillance of Susan, with whom he is equally obsessed, as part of his resolute effort to bring down Brown's "combo". In that sense, the overall narrative structure of the film seems directly derivative of John Cromwell's *The Racket* or Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat*, as both films display corruption as an aggregation of all the desires, ambitions, and negotiations of a city, rather than some kind of abstract force or entity. With *The Racket*, the parallelism with *The Big Combo* is established essentially by the crossfire that exists between the city's prosecuting attorney, Welch (Ray Collins), and a police detective, Turck (William Conrad), who are both crooks and part of a whole set of political machinations. In the latter, *The Big Heat*, we have Glenn Ford as Dave Bannion, the iron-willed, dedicated homicide detective who investigates the trail of a vicious gang he suspects holds power over the police force. Here again it is the gangster's spurned girlfriend Debby Marsh (Gloria Grahame)¹⁰² who comes to Bannion's assistance to bring down the gangster boss Mike Lagana (Alexander Scourby). Both of these films, thus, offer a searing portrait of American corruption, and as far as style is concerned, they both stand alongside *The Big Combo*. Lang's film, however, inverts the narrative paradigm that is part

¹⁰² Gloria Grahame is best known in this film for the facial disfigurement she suffers at the hands of her sadistic and cold-blooded boyfriend, Vince Stone (Lee Marvin), when he callously flings hot coffee into her face.

of most *noir* films including *The Big Combo*, insofar as the tradition of the *femme fatale* is concerned.

At this point, I wish to reference the new cycle that *film noir* went through and which stresses how much it is indebted to the gangster film. Inspired by the Kefauver Commission on organised crime,¹⁰³ this cycle adapts the psychological approach of *noirs* of the forties but now with an emphasis on the corrupted American towns and cities. Many exposé *noir* gangster films were produced during this decade, with films such as Bretonne Windust / Raoul Walsh's *The Enforcer*, with the opening narration voiced by Estes Kefauver (who was heading a Senate investigation into organised crime at that time); Robert Wise's *The Captive City* (1952), in which Senator Kefauver appears in the film as himself; Fred Sears's *Chicago Syndicate*, portraying a public accountant, Barry Amsterdam (Dennis O'Keefe), who again single-handedly tries to bring down a powerful mobster; or Phil Karlson's *The Phenix City Story*, a drama that describes the real-life 1954 assassination of Alabama attorney general Albert Patterson, all these three films from 1955. In *noir* films of the fifties, the mob seems to have influential social ties, and to be well-established. Although *The Big Combo* does not put so much emphasis on the social corruption found in *The Racket* or *The Big Heat*, its mobsters seem as open and untouchable as in these films. In fact, Mr Brown and the Combo he controls seem indestructible. The film literally refers to the mob here, and various critics also point out to certain political undertones that the film wants to convey: the world had been threatened by totalitarian dictators and the character of Mr Brown reflected some of their psychotic over-confidence.

Another reason for my selection of *The Big Combo* at this point has to do with the link the film has with *noir* semi-documentaries. The semi-documentary phase of *film noir* during the fifties meant an essential detachment and objectivity of the form in which we see police investigators taken from the real world (see p. 214). The milieu of these stories is no longer the enclosed and fictional one of Hammett or Chandler narratives, but rather true-life settings taken from the files of the FBI and newspaper headlines. As Foster Hirsch summarises:

¹⁰³ Carey Estes Kefauver was an American politician, renown nationwide for his position as the chairman of the senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce in the early 1950s.

Investigators in these case-history reconstructions remain disinterested. They are professionals doing a job. Yet they are fired by goals higher than Marlowe's – higher, that is, than interest and pleasure in cracking a case. These hunters are patriots, crusading journalists, lawyers determined to defeat a corrupt political machine, FBI men bent on toppling a crime syndicate. In these hard-hitting problem dramas, *noir* emerges from the fictional labyrinth to become a form of propaganda: the crime thriller as a social pamphlet, as journalistic exposé, as contemporary crusade. The narrative structure of these semi-documentary films is much the same as that of private eye whodunits: an outside investigator confronts a maze. The plotting is as complicated and gnarled as the crack questioner grills a series of witnesses. (Hirsch 1981:177)

Normally shot on location, and featuring a narration that would later become the signature of Jack Webb's *Dragnet* television series, these *noir* semi-documentaries from the forties and early fifties indeed offered meticulous accounts of the manner law enforcement agencies, such as the FBI, operate, concentrating on the techniques and investigation procedures used. Some remarkable examples, such as Henry Hathaway's *The House on 92nd Street*, or its follow-up William Keighley's *The Street with No Name*, or yet Jules Dassin's *The Naked City* and Hathaway's *Call Northside 777*, all come from 1948.

Although there were other examples of *noir* semi-documentaries made throughout the fifties, like Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets*, Gordon Douglas's *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (1951) or Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1956), this form of film differ from the earlier semi-documentaries in various ways. In fact, the earlier semi-documentaries, also called "docu-noirs", often set in dark, rain-swept, crime-ridden urban areas (in other words, set in the same locales as the *noir* "private eye whodunits" films, as Hirsch states) were filmed in the actual locations of real-life events. In these "new police hero" films, the police investigators were not working for national organisations, like Dennis O'Brien (Dennis O'Keefe) who was an undercover agent for the Treasury Department in Anthony Mann's *T-Men* or the undercover agent Gene Cordell (Mark Stevens) who worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation in *The Street with No Name*. The policemen fighting crime in these mid-1950s *noir* films, such as *The Racket* or *The Big Combo*, are now isolated heroes, that is, cops with little help from the rest of the force. For example, Police Lt Leonard Diamond (Cornel Wilde) of *The Big Combo*, unlike in the case of the team-oriented semi-documentaries of the late forties, is not an undercover agent who has gone "rogue" in hiding from his adversaries. His identity is known to all the mobsters right from the beginning and he operates in public – and thus a new public awareness of organised crime was accepted and incorporated into the narrative.

2.4.1.1 “*First is First and Second Is Nobody*”: The Underworld of Brutality and Sexual Innuendo

Many of the scenes in the film take place at the police station, where high technology equipment (of that time) is being used. In his quest for the sinister mob head, Diamond uses a lie detector and also has recourse to a photographic enlargement laboratory. One could easily argue that these were essential instruments present in any police station. In the film, however, they highlight how much *The Big Combo* is structured as a mystery story. That detective paraphernalia symbolises the uses of melodramatic revelations and the gradual search for truth of Lt Diamond. This soon becomes a voyage to the unconscious where personal revelations of the characters’ psyches may be opened up against their wills. This voyage follows the many different routes that are suggested by the numerous maps displayed on the walls of the police station. Unlike other Lewis’s films,¹⁰⁴ these maps do not contain any immediate relevance for the viewer of *The Big Combo*.

A number of mechanisms come into play here. The truth sometimes surfaces from altered states of consciousness. This happens many times in the film, especially during the brutal sequences of the movie (one might recall in this context the sophisticated fistfights in Lewis’s films), like for example, when Brown tortures Diamond by alcohol intoxication or by sticking thug Joe McClure’s (Brian Donlevy) hearing aid into his ear, turning the volume to the maximum setting, and then yelling into it. Despite the expressions of agony on the detective’s face, Lewis chooses not to let us hear anything, making it thus a subjective representation of the sound with an explicit desire to see pain inflicted on the screen. I will come back below to the significance of another similar scene in which the victim’s hearing aid is ripped away creating total silence while the assassins’ tommy guns fire away.

¹⁰⁴ *So Dark the Night* and *A Lady Without Passport*.

This eccentric torture scene (fig. 110)¹⁰⁵ is actually filmed with high background shadow – John Alton framing the characters as silhouettes cast in ominous greys. The technique used is indeed very similar to the one applied by Harry J. Wild in *Murder, My Sweet* (fig. 111), mentioned before (p. 45). This scene in an interrogation room opens the film with extremely contrastive lighting and photography: Marlowe (Dick Powell) is sitting under a bright light (just like detective Diamond in fig. 110). The two hostile police interrogators dominate the frame, and from an iconographical angle, it makes Marlowe even more submissive due to his disempowered position (he cannot see) and the blindfold further completes this symbolic castration.



Figure 110. *The Big Combo*



Figure 111. *Murder, My Sweet*

Both the above scenes cast a sense of doom over both detectives. This is the reason why I believe that the photography and the lighting in these scenes suggest the great odds against these two *noir* (anti) heroes. At the same time, these scenes are so contingent on the personal violence and passion of the characters that Lewis and screenwriter Philip Yordan can barely maintain the subterfuge of the story as merely another good example of the extent to which organised crime corrupted postwar American life.

¹⁰⁵ This brutal scene has often been compared to Roman Polanski's nose job on Jack Nicholson in American neo-*noir* *Chinatown* (1974) some twenty years later (Polanski himself appears in the film as a vicious hoodlum who slices off part of J.J. "Jake" Gittes's (Jack Nicholson) nose. Although out of the scope of this thesis, it is worth mentioning that the film director followed the *noir* tradition, and actually pays homage to Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, especially embodied in *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*. In fact, all the events of the film are seen subjectively through J.J. "Jake" Gittes's eyes. Relevant to the scenes of the films mentioned in my text above, when Gittes is rendered unconscious with a beating, the film turns totally black, and then gradually fades back in when he awakens.

In *The Big Combo* the unconscious truth emerges in the lie detector scene, in which Mr. Brown's secrets start to become exposed. Similarly, when Marlowe, in *Murder, My Sweet*, agrees to go together with Marriott (Douglas Walton) to a night-time rendezvous, he finds that Marriott gets beaten to death. Marlowe, meanwhile, gets clubbed from behind and falls to the ground. This is when his voiceover starts: "I caught the blackjack right behind my ear. A black pool opened up at my feet. I dived right in. It had no bottom". The screen fades to dark until when there is just a point of light at the centre. As the point of light grows, from someone holding a torch beam, Marlowe interjects, "I felt pretty good. Like an amputated leg." Again, this scene bears various iconographical meanings. On the one hand, the "amputated leg" alludes to castration, similarly to the broken leg of L.B. Jeffries (James Stewart) in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, or the flowery apron around Chris Cross's neck that chastises him in *Scarlet Street*. On the other hand, in *The Big Combo*, Joe McClure's hearing aid not only constitutes a torture device but, in one of the most brutal scenes of the film, it also visually depicts the violence that goes unheeded by society. Towards the end of the film, when Mr. Brown suspects that McClure has sold him out, he discreetly decides to machine-gun him. McClure begs for his life, and, as an odd touch to his execution, Brown reassures him out of mock compassion: "I'm gonna fix it, so you don't hear the bullets", ripping the hearing aid off his ear, and shoots him. In this scene Lewis cuts to the victim's point of view, and as spectators we see silent machineguns spitting flames before the merciful fade to black.

Suffice to say that these two sadistic scenes (using the hearing aid) were particularly graphic in their display of violence and were rare for their time. Again, as read in a *film noir* screenings programme, *The Big Combo*,

(...) like *New York Confidential*,¹⁰⁶ is an example of the phenomenon of 1950s American cinema which presented a campaign for J. Edgar Hoover-ization and the F.B.I.'s long arm of the law into local government. These Hollywood pieces of entertainment played double duty in filling a vacuum of what was perceived as an inability of local government to handle organized crime because of corruption. While "payola" was certainly a factor in the daily business of urban crime gangs, in retrospect, publicity for the F.B.I. with Hoover as head may have been like putting the fox in charge of the chicken coop. Edgar never admitted that a "Mafia" existed

¹⁰⁶ *New York Confidential* is a *noir* production directed by Russell Rouse and, similarly to *The Big Combo*, was also released in 1955. Featuring *noir* protagonist Richard Conte in the role of Nick Magellan, a Chicago low-level hoodlum, the film is a further example of the American dream achieved through crime and corruption.

and was careful to present organized crime as an unorganized entity. (*Film Noir* screenings - http://www.noirfilm.com/Screenings_Richard_Conte.htm)

Although a film with minimal dialogue, *The Big Combo* uses a hard-boiled script with some hideously black humour and suggests a dangerously obsessed sexuality for its central trio. From very early scenes, Brown spells out his own individual credo when bullying and lecturing a boxer who sits bloody and disheartened after losing a fight: "First is first and second is nobody!" From the outset, we never get to know how Brown really makes his money from the Bolmec Corporation, "the largest pool of illegal money in the world", as Captain Peterson puts it when handing the case to Lt Diamond. However, with his fast, clipped way of speaking, we soon enter into Brown's mind and understand that the key to his succeeding in life is hate.

The relationship between Susan Lowell and Mr. Brown is in itself a blend of fatalistic deference combined with a feeling of raw sexual abandon. Throughout the film, Brown's combative words are fuelled with perverse sexuality, as when, for example, he lectures his men to pursue power as this will mean that "the girls will come tumbling after you". As for Susan, she seems to be totally defenceless before Brown's sadistic seduction, resigning herself to sexual dependence on Brown. When she asks him for affection, he replies "Love? We can talk about love some another time". The exhilarating mix of sex and violence makes *The Big Combo* one of the few *noir* films fuelled by a vicious sexuality, with nearly all relationships being defined by varying degrees of sexual obsession. The conspicuous homosexuality of Mingo (Earl Holliman) and Fante (Lee Van Cleef), Brown's hit-men, is associated with a tendency to sadism and torture, as they refine the conventions of their profession into a shared sexual ritual. Their homosexuality is less sublimated than in any other *noir* film: the two men, who are constantly at Mr Brown's beck and call, are always seen together, sleep in the same room like a married couple, and are considerate and thoughtful towards each other. And this attitude remains even until death, stressing their already emotionally powerful relationship, almost in a theatrical manner. When Fante dies during an explosion, his friend Mingo holds his body and, in tears, calls out to his beloved partner, "Don't leave me, Fante!"¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ After the screening of the film during the "Third Annual Palm Springs *Film Noir* Festival in 2003", Earl Holliman, who played Mingo, remarked that "We shared a pair of pajamas, Lee's wearing the bottoms and I'm wearing the top of the pajamas and it's pretty obvious what's going on" (De Stefano 2006:226).

It is not only in terms of narrative resolution that lovers in *film noir* are not allowed to live happily ever after. It is also in terms of the *mise-en-scène* or visual style that the physical contiguity of lovers (whether created by landscape / set, or by camera angle, framing and lighting) is presented as fragmented and disturbing. In the scene below (fig. 112) the sexuality of the two characters, Diamond and Rita (Diamond's on-and-off girlfriend), remains unspoken yet sufficiently expressive through the *mise-en-scène*. And so too is that of Mingo and Fante, where their intimacy is insisted upon as a childish reciprocal interdependence. In the scene below, there is a kind of metamorphosis: Leonard has his back turned to the woman, and as he tries to put her shoe on, he gently touches her leg. Yet, the viewer understands that his thoughts go to Susan whom, in the sequence immediately after, we see being brought to the height of sexual excitement by Brown.¹⁰⁸



Figure 112. The Big Combo

Taking into account the censorship reasons debated in Part II, it is also possible to state that the gap that exists in these *noir* narratives between the detective who tries to solve the mystery and the omission of the signifier for woman can be shown to define the fictional space of classical *noir* detective story. In other words, the absence of this signifier

¹⁰⁸ This is the scene in which Lewis offended his leading actress by insisting that she make it clear that she is addicted to oral sex / cunnilingus. And this forty years before it became a central and acknowledged narrative strand of HBO's *The Sopranos*, when Junior Soprano conceals his taste for cunnilingus because it will undermine his position in the hierarchy as a mobster (see Robson 2005:178).

makes the sexual relation impossible; if it existed this signifier would be the signifier for woman. Throughout *The Big Combo* the film constructs a different sort of fictional world which is also translated into the crude sexuality of the film. It is difficult for Lieutenant Diamond, as a classical detective, to have any involvement with a woman. He is in love with Susan from afar, and in this regard, he may remind us of Lt. McPherson (Dana Andrews) in *Laura*, especially in that quiet evening when he is alone with Laura's portrait, dreaming – only to have her become visible upon awakening. On the other hand, the torture scenes may reflect, as many viewers suspect, the s/m homosexual crush that Diamond has on Mr Brown, giving the film a twisted, dark *noir* undertone. Similarly, it is implausible for Diamond, as a *noir* hero, to escape such involvement with Susan Lowell.

The choice that Diamond faces is not between two people, his chief and a lover, but between the world of classical detection and *film noir*. Out of the many films analysed throughout this study, the detective comes to identify more and more closely with his criminal opponent. Some good examples, to cite a few, are *Double Indemnity*, where Neff (Fred MacMurray) is both investigator and murderer and his colleague, Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), is a tenacious chief investigator who possesses a heartless and absolutist morality (clearly stressed when he becomes upset at the company's inefficiency and poorly-researched claims); the dilemma of *Nightfall*'s protagonist Vanning (Aldo Ray) and his distorted point-of-view in his fight to figure out how such past occurrences have put him in such a perilous situation; or even William Wyler's *Detective Story* (1951), where a resentful cop, Det. Jim McLeod (Kirk Douglas), leads his bleak daily battle with the city's lowlifes in his confined police precinct, which contributes to the underlying thematic plunge and ultimately to the film's disturbing power.

The interpretation that is required for the detective to put together the evidence to solve the crime may be said to be at the same level as the concept of *desire* expressed by Jacques Lacan. In fact, Lacan's *désir*, which follows Freud's concept of *Wunsch*, aims precisely at uncovering the truth, just as the detective manifests his *desire* in interpreting the clues. However, as Lacan states, an interpretation has certain effects which are not (necessarily) understood as a psychoanalytic interpretation. In this way the *noir* detective, just like Lieutenant Diamond, may busy himself with the task of ignoring desire and taking the evidence literally, conflating signifiers and signifieds.

Although the idea is not to go into all the complexities of psychoanalysis, what I am proposing here is that we seem to see an inversion that defines the shift from classical detection to *film noir*, not so much in terms of identification but rather in terms of the choice between sense and being or, in Lacanian theory, between desire and drive (drive here differs from any biological needs as they can never be satisfied and do not aim at objects either but rather circle unendingly around them - so the genuine basis of *jouissance* is to repeat the movement of this closed circuit). Rather, Lacan posits the drives as both cultural and symbolic (discourse) constructs. And in the shift from desire to drive, says Lacan, the individual moves from the lost object to the loss itself as an object.

This brings me back to the gap that I was referring to above, the “impossible” quest for the lost object which will directly enact the loss itself. The endless circularity of the drive seems to engage Christopher Cross or Walter Neff, in *Scarlet Street* and *Double Indemnity* respectively. With both, but most notably in the case of Cross, we could perhaps sum up the character’s mixed feelings with Lacan’s theory: “Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second” (in Fink 1996:90). In fact, all three main *noir* protagonists of these films (Diamond, Cross and Neff) seem to follow this circular trajectory or gap responsible for the onset of desire. Thus, one could say that the cause of desire elicits desire which in turn is metonymically responsible for the slippage from one object to the next.

For the theory of the abjection, suggested by Julia Kristeva, this lost object exists within both notions of “object” and “subject”, something which is alive or maybe not. There is a play around the revealing and the concealing of the woman in these films (even of the woman in the past, as in *Rebecca*, for example, that is perpetuated through a trail of visual clues; or in *Laura* – if Laura is never fully present in the film, then equally she is never fully absent either. In fact, her narrative presence is over-determined by the recurrent discussion of her by other characters). These women – Susan, Kitty, and Phyllis – seem to be situated in the sphere of over-idealisation which equates, in Kristevan terms, to an imaginary return to the maternal *chora*, or the place of plenitude (or what Lacan calls “the Real”) for the male protagonists. Being forced to face the fact that these women are intangible at any time, the male characters in most of these films are led to traumatic experiences and end up killing their object of desire.

I am obviously entering now into a new realm of qualities and attributes represented by the *femmes fatales* in these *noir* films. The way these women exert their control over men shows a gender role reversal (p. 175), which, in the light of Lacanian theory, is manifested in “the Other’s gaze” that elicits desire. Fig. 113 below is an interesting scene from *Scarlet Street*, as it represents Cross’s ultimate submission to Kitty when she hands him a bottle of nail polish so he can paint her toenails. The scene is very similar to fig. 112 above, even in artistic terms: the implicit sexuality is expressed with the woman stretching her leg to the man. While it is clear that in fig. 112 the sexual charge is transposed literally to “the other” (Diamond is attracted to Susan Lowell), in the scene below Cross sees in Kitty’s “Lazy Legs” all he could desperately hope for: the fragranced warmth and understanding that he thinks Kitty represents. In both cases, however, the two male protagonists appear to be sexually frustrated and compensating for their own impotence.

Just to conclude this comparison of sexual charge that is present in these two films in particular and in *film noir* in general, it is important to emphasise from a semiotic point of view that as substitution and displacement (the two axes of language mentioned on p. 262) correspond to the working of the unconscious, so do desire and sexuality and this is the reason why sexuality cannot be considered the result of a need. The unconscious manifests itself in these scenes in acts of courtly love and submission which, as Lacan declared, “is an altogether refined way of making up for the absence of sexual relation by pretending that it is we who put up an obstacle to it” (in Easthope 1999:68).



Figure 113. *Scarlet Street*

Neff's entrapment and destruction by the fatal and sexual magnetism of Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* started from the minute he sees her wrapped in a towel, fresh from sunbathing, and is manifest even in the presence of her own husband (as seen in fig. 114 below). Interestingly, the woman's pose is similar to the ones used by the two female protagonists of figures 112 and 113. Here Phyllis provocatively stretches her leg forward too, however inaccessibly to Neff, as their complicit look, charged with sexual intent, seems to be barred by the presence of the husband who is looking down while reading the clauses of the insurance policy which (ironically) will make him the primary target.



Figure 114. *Double Indemnity*

The act of humiliation and assertion of power depicted when Brown and his men capture Diamond in *The Big Combo* is perhaps what most powerfully represents the sexual theme in the film, at least psychologically. As seen above, Brown has Diamond seated on a chair while he tortures him (fig. 110), causing Diamond to become even more obsessed by him. The film seems to be celebrating a power-worshipping relationship, or sexual potency, and crime and violence appear to be other forms of manifesting this association. In fact, there is an affinity between sex and violence, combining a sense of fatalism with perverse sexuality. A scene such as the forcing of a bottle of hair tonic down Diamond's throat is just as effective graphically as the sequence during which Mr Brown kisses Susan and the camera focuses in on Susan's face, as Brown's head sinks down her body, as he tells her he will do whatever she wants. These two particular examples combine the explicit brutality and the sexuality that we encounter in *The Big Combo*, in such a suggestive way (yet sufficiently shown by implication) that even the censors of that time, although unhappy with these sequences, could do nothing but let them remain in the film as shot.

2.4.1.2 *The Big Combo* and Generic Transformation

The Big Combo preserves its elusiveness as to sexual identity until the very last scene of the film, in which we see Diamond and Susan walking together (but not touching) in an airplane hangar. This atmospheric shot by John Alton becomes as important as the plot resolution of the film, as it shows the couple disappearing into a gloomy, all-enveloping fog (fig. 115). The scene is emphatically symbolic: the thick layers of bleak fog keep them confined and separated, even though liberated from Mr Brown. The scene projects their future which, although not clear, still shows some light. Intended to endorse Susan's choice of the ambivalent personal and professional attraction of Diamond over the dominant, unchanged masculinity of Brown, it fails to contradict what has gone before.



Figure 115. *The Big Combo*

The symbology of the fog is also extremely powerful in this film from a semiotic perspective. If in most *noir* productions we are often in the rain, for example, as one of the most distinctive visual elements of *film noir*, the symbol of fog here constitutes the uncertainty the characters are confronted with. The indistinguishable blurred images (one can just see a wheel barrow on the left corner) and the faded lights are further accentuated by the imperceptible noises and sounds that surround the premises. The black and white colours signify their emotion state of vagueness and ambiguity, and their posture (both

filmed from the back) is also an important code – Diamond is standing completely still and rigid in the background and is looking into the distance, which signifies his reflective and deep nature. When they both meet up in the above fog-bound aeroplane hangar, the viewer finally acknowledges that Susan Lowell is after all the real cause and source of their shared antipathy.



Figure 116. *Gun Crazy*

The ending of the film recalls that of Lewis's *Gun Crazy*. Both lead characters of the film, Annie Laurie and Bart, end up in a marshy swamp filled with fog, as shown above in fig. 116. They have both become hunted fugitives and have planned one last substantial heist to finance their retirement from crime. However, they end up lost and shrouded in fog. This final atmospheric scene is a clear signifier of the insecurity and danger that await them wherever they go. Just like the protagonists, viewers find their vision blurred and distorted, making it harder to identify anything or anyone. The shroud of thick fog that blankets them in the swamp anticipates the final showdown: the camera focuses on their fearful faces as it tries to define their shapes through the mist. They both hear menacing footsteps and voices coming afar. Although through the fog, the camera picks out Annie but her features cannot help but be indistinct. Merged with the fog in this way, the images signify that she has lost her identity by the end of the film. In their last few moments of life

and knowing they are both surrounded, Bart declares his love for Annie and gives her one final kiss.

Having similar endings, with the same signifiers, both films work powerfully towards this idea of mystery. In *The Big Combo* the finale might not be so dramatic, as we do not know what the future holds for both protagonists, whereas in *Gun Crazy* the dizzying narrative style (forward and back and round again) culminates in a mercy killing by Bart set in a savage and poetic landscape. The only murder he commits in the entire film is that of Annie, finally adopting her own brutal *modus operandi*. He kills her somewhat out of love and thus silences her deadly ability to go on killing. In the meantime, the police arrive and mistakenly believing that Bart has fired the gun at one of them, he is cut down by police gunfire. Their bodies fall together in a final, lifeless embrace.

Finally, the other aspect common to both films is their female protagonists. Susan is a mysterious woman: she might be the *femme fatale* for Diamond (she feels his obsession for her), and yet she is in thrall to her crime-lord boyfriend Mr Brown because of his ability to bring her to new levels (made implicit for censorship reasons) of sexual arousal, as I have described above. It is precisely the exploitative elements, the overt and implied expressions of sex and violence that give *The Big Combo* its ductile and distinctly contemporary appeal. Concerning Annie, she is a carnival performer whose sexual make-up is never wholly made clear, but it has to do with an excessive attachment to and excitement in the use of guns. In any case, both women are sexually defined by their attraction to violence.

Having said that, our involvement (and, in a sense, our complicity) with the narrative is indicative of the fact that we want to know what makes Annie act as the aggressive partner or understand Susan's culpability in associating Brown. Yet, while in the *noirs* of the forties the spectator discovers the crime puzzle when the criminal is identified (and the law is served), in the *noirs* of the fifties, specifically in these two films, the storytelling changes and tortured psychology become more stressed and so they do not conscript viewer sympathy to the same extent as, for example, *Double Indemnity* does.

2.4.1.3 Conclusion

The popularity of the private eye as a lead character decreased in *film noir* of the fifties. In films such as *The Big Combo* or *Kiss Me Deadly* the protagonists might be detectives and yet they have a more compromised role when compared to the *noir* hero of the first and second periods. In the films of this third phase we no longer get the private eye as a “lone wolf”; instead he is a rather more sociologically laden figure. Moreover, *film noir*’s final phase was the most aesthetically extreme, and after ten years of increasingly finessing romantic conventions, the later *noir* films showed the roots of the form in sexual pathology and psychic instability, as I have tried to draw it out in Lewis’s work. These differences have clearly also to do with the realities of Hollywood production and consumption during the period 1940-58, along with the new widescreen technologies that were an attempt to persuade back the family audience. Paul Schrader summarises this idea by stating that:

As the rise of McCarthy and Eisenhower demonstrated, Americans were eager to see a more bourgeois view of themselves. Crime had to move to the suburbs. The criminal put on a grey flannel suit, and the footsore cop was replaced by the “mobile unit” careening down the expressway. Any attempt to social criticism had to be cloaked in ludicrous affirmations of the American way of life. Technically, television, with its demand for full lighting and close-ups, gradually undercut the German influence, and color cinematography was, of course, the final blow to the *noir* look. (Schrader 1972:7)

I should also add that for a long period of time *film noir* was prominently based on corruption and despair, and so was perceived as an abnormal representation of the American character, as a rejection of usually affirmative American commercial entertainment. As the cycle came to an end sociological changes resulted in a shift in national preoccupations, those that arouse in essence from a sustained period of economic prosperity, but which were going to lead into a period of unprecedented national strife in the sixties. Throughout these three broad phases of *film noir*, what we discover is that the majority of *noirs* can be understood as being genre pieces belonging mainly to the detective film, the thriller, and the crime mystery melodrama. These can be categorised separately and yet they also have so much in common.

As the *noir* movement entered the late forties and early fifties, many of the styles and strategies of the earlier productions were absorbed by mainstream filmmakers, and Joseph H. Lewis was certainly one of them, starting to work for the smaller studios on miniscule budgets (*Gun Crazy*, for example, was shot on a negligible budget for the famous King Brothers, who focused on producing low-budget tales of violence). Downbeat crime films, such as *The Big Combo*, indeed embrace a visual style that is more aggressive when compared to other earlier *noirs*.

In the case of Joseph H. Lewis, this section has tried to demonstrate that his *noir* work is extreme, among the strongest in its appeal to violence and sex in *noir* filmmaking. Lewis displayed them in a rather unique manner, when compared to other filmmakers, and this was particularly visible from the audience's acceptance of his films. The viewer becomes almost a virtual accomplice in the crimes of *Gun Crazy*, and this effect is obtained by Lewis's unusual long takes and speed. The four-minute uninterrupted take in which Annie Laurie and Bart rob a small-town bank stands as an invigorating example. The staging of this and other similar scenes in *The Big Combo* are also evidence of Lewis's artistic talent as a director. In this regard, critic Eddie Muller considers that:

Joseph H. Lewis's direction is propulsive, possessed of a confident, vigorous simplicity that all the frantic editing and visual pyrotechnics of the filmmaking progeny never quite surpassed. (Muller 1998:168)

While Lewis's *Gun Crazy* is a film that eroticises speed and violence behind the wheel of a car or the sensuous power that holding a gun might have, *The Big Combo* also suggests the same obvious sense of fatalism and perverse sexuality, when Mr Brown tortures Lt Diamond and progressively eliminates his confederates, or, as the sequence described above, when Susan Lowell utterly abandons herself to what is certainly an act of oral sex performed by her boyfriend, Mr Brown.

From *Double Indemnity* in 1944 to *The Big Combo* in 1955 *film noir* maintained a critique of mainstream affirmative film art, in which political and social disaffection is rendered in striking aesthetic terms. Lewis's films are a final throw of the "B" movie aesthetic dice, a final outcrop of outrageous sexuality and brutality. When compared with "A" films and their subject matter in Hollywood major productions, it is possible to say that the exhilarating combination of sex and violence found in Lewis's films, mixed with more serious themes around organised crime and corporate corruption, constituted an

audaciously atypical blend of “B” movie exploitation elements. It is precisely at the level of exploitive elements that the film gains a new dimension: first through the minimal dialogues (different from the witty lines found in other well-known *noirs*) and then through stylistically photographed scenes which play out at a verbal rather than a physical level (perhaps as a consequence of both budgetary and censorship constraints). *The Big Combo* still offers us a world that is seriously twisted, essentially a nightmare world and thus stays true to the fundamental impulse of *film noir*.

V. Conclusions:

1 Genre Revisited

The artist brings to the genre his or her concerns, techniques, and capacities – in the widest sense, a style – but receives from the genre a formal pattern that directs and disciplines the work. In a sense this imposes limitations (...). (Buscombe 2003:22)

In film theory, genre refers to the method of categorising a film based on the perceptible similitudes out of which film meanings are constructed. The term remains however controversial; within film criticism, there seems to be no agreement about what exactly the term means or what functions it actually performs. Film genres have been described as pure invention by some (like Robert Stam), as they seem to spring from the relationship between a specific production system and a given audience. More and more, however, we are confronted with a range of Hollywood genres, based on the elements from recurring patterns which are common to all the commercial films that we can call detective films, or Westerns, or gangster films. Indeed, when studying film genres, our analysis tends to focus on formulas, icons, motifs, etc, as the persistent elements common to all these films. It is by contrasting these familiar elements with other films that the discussion of genre starts, finding particular meanings in a given film within the context of other similar films. Through repetition and variation, these genre films arouse expectations and generate experiences similar to those felt in connection with similar pre-existing films.

Nevertheless, the application of genre is rarely so definite, with clearly demarcated boundaries. On the one hand, the critical recognition of its place and importance is relatively recent in the categorisation of cinema. In chronological terms, genre criticism precedes the early work of *auteurism*, but its subsequent development has not been as popular as the *auteur* theory (in the writings of Andrew Sarris, for example). On the other hand, critical interest in film studies moved from the signifieds of film to the practice of signification, in other words, from what a film “means” to how it produces meaning, and

genre was seen to play an important part in this process. Then, a major concern was evinced for the ways ideology exerted an influence on art, following theories coming from the works of Althusser, Brecht, Freud, and others. In cinematic terms, this led to the postulate that film directors and their *oeuvres* might provide the key to interpretation. Therefore, the sources of meaning were now thought to come from the combination of various discursive codes present in the film text, of which the directorial code was only one strand (and so famous directors like Fuller, Hawks, and Hitchcock became filmic signifiers in their own right). In due course, this focus on signification and ideology contributed to a significant change in the way that the classical narrative film in general, and genre films in particular, were perceived.

Genres thus were significant for examination as “generic analysis would involve the consideration of economic and historical contexts (conditions of production and consumption), conventions and mythic functions (semiotic codes and structural patterns), and the place of particular filmmakers within genres (tradition and the individual *auteur*)” (Grant 2003a:xvii). In this way, genre criticism has been able to encourage new attitudes towards film, and indeed, as Grant suggests, it can be understood as a place where the overlapping (but also sometimes separate) concerns of *auteurism*, Marxism, semiology, structuralism, and feminism potentially possibly meet. The critic also concludes that, back in the eighties, leftist critics managed to move away from the perspective of genres as “mythic embodiments of the dominant ideology” (ibid.). A clear example of this is the way that many contemporary horror films were interpreted as a criticism of American society rather than as a mode of support for its doubts and oppressions. In this regard, Curt Siodmak argues that:

In its day, *Frankenstein*, the forerunner of a generation of admitted mumbo jumbo and lots of entertainment, was a true trail blazer, and in effect opened up Hollywood-produced motion pictures to both psychiatry and neurosurgery. What now seems primitive in *Metropolis* or the Jekyll-Hydean cycle of werewolf pictures are simply variations on the theme which Siegfried Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler* characterised as a “deep and fearful concern with the foundations of the self.” (Siodmak 1968:64)

While this type of film bears a certain concern for the moral state of contemporary society, with real implications for the understanding of our inner nature which engage concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis, the above article further focuses on society or at least

on social aspects through a dramatisation of the individual's anxiety about his or her own repressed sexual desires, which are unable to coexist with the morals of civilised life. From the point of view of social conventions, I also believe that they help us to identify the genre of a film according to the established cultural consensus within that society.

It is perhaps for this reason that notions about genres are relevant for exploring the psychological and sociological interplay that exists between the filmmaker, the film, and the audience rather than for the immediate purpose of interpreting film's meanings. Because a genre, as Andrew Tudor suggests, is "what we collectively believe it to be" (Tudor 1973:139), our expectations of what we believe a genre is condition our responses to a genre film from the very first frame. This methodology in turn raises theoretical issues. In particular, it sends us back to the need to develop sociological and psychological theories of film, involving contemporary versions of social myth. And as spectators we obviously model our values and behaviours, to a significant degree, on conventions and traditions that are connected to values within a community.

As critical spaces, genres can thus be said to be artistic constructs or paradigms, and if "genre" is a vague term with no fixed boundaries, as I said at the beginning, one might simply doubt their existence. In this respect, film theorist Robert Stam has questioned whether they are no more than the invention of film critics:

[Are] genres really "out there" in the world, or are they merely the constructions of analysts? (...) [Is there] a finite taxonomy of genres or are they in principle infinite? (...) Are they timeless Platonic essences or ephemeral, time-bound entities? Are genres culture-bound or trans-cultural? (Stam 2000:14)

As I have mentioned in my Acknowledgments, when I interviewed French director Luc Besson, he too pointed out that he was not convinced that genres existed as such, but that in the complex exchange system which makes up cinema, what are inaccurately designated "genres" could rather be seen as autonomous stylistic mechanisms (the various uses of actors, sets, camera movements, montage) that function as specific signifying nexuses to ensure that the production of meaning and its ideological agendas can be prescriptive. Whether this might be considered a way of "existing" is arguable, yet it shows that genres have served a definite function in the economy of cinema as a whole, involving a vast quantity of human subjects, a technology, and an evolving set of signifying practices, etc.

In a long essay, Stephen Heath lays stress on the process of regulation, in the sense of a certain independent mechanism, in the classical economy of film, more specifically that of narrativisation:

Narrativization is then the term of a film's entertaining: process and process contained, the subject bound in that process and its directions of meaning. The ideological operation lies in the balance, in the capture and regulation of energy; film circulates – rhythms, spaces, surfaces, moments, multiple intensities of signification – and narrativization entertains the subject – on screen in frame – in exact turnings of difference and repetition, semiotic and suture, negativity and negation; in short, the spectator is *moved*, and *related* as subject in the process and images of that movement. (Heath 1981:62)

While anyone who has watched movies and reflected on the experience of spectatorship would agree that, as a matter of simple fact, to watch is to be “moved” and simultaneously to be held, in a coherence of meaning and vision, Heath then develops the notion of “the spatial organization of film”, and the extent to which the Hollywood film system has taught us to be attracted by the economy of “sameness” present in genres. Moreover, the fact that filmmakers “organise” their productions around genres and/or film categories helps the viewer and the whole industry in terms of consumption and marketing: “the spectator is *moved*,” but above all he or she feels “*related* as subject in the process and images of that movement.”

Some may say (as Heath does) that this “spatial organization of film” can be achieved by the setting of the film. However, the location of the film might not always determine the genre, as films can have the same setting (a war context, for example), and yet portray different themes and moods. Moreover, genres cannot automatically be defined as a form of film distinguished by subject matter, theme, or technique, for the same reasons. In fact, there seems to be categories within categories of genre which overlap (such as comedy-thrillers) but which are not mutually exclusive. Having posed the problem in such apparently inexplicable terms, Edward Buscombe writes that:

(...) the problem is only another aspect of the wider philosophical problem of universals. With regard to the cinema, we may state it thus: if we want to know what a western is, we must look at certain kinds of films. But how do we know which films to look at until we know what a western is? (Buscombe 2003:14)

Buscombe is right: if we take a genre such as a Western and examine it in terms of its main characteristics, this implies first isolating the body of films that are Westerns. Yet, these major characteristics can only be detected once the films themselves have been isolated. Inasmuch as this may have a “snowball effect”, Andrew Tudor explains that:

This “empiricist dilemma” has two solutions. One is to classify films according to a priori criteria depending on the critical purpose. (...) The second is to lean on a common cultural consensus as to what constitutes a western and then go on to analyze it in detail. (Tudor 2003:5)

Yet, Tudor’s second solution to this problem of definition may not be plausible either because the “common cultural consensus” may be vitiated by the fact that the cultural and social dimensions of genre are not always applicable. If not by setting, then by narrative content, or by form (including structure and style), the “empiricist dilemma” presented by Tudor still persists. As regards the process of genre, I have tried to analyse it from the perspectives of production (according to a restricted mode of communication among members of a production team), distribution (a method of product differentiation), and consumption (viewer involvement). Rick Altman also suggests a distinction between “film genre” and “genre film”:

By definition all films belong to some genre(s), at least in terms of distribution categories, but only certain films are self-consciously produced and consumed according to (or against) a specific generic model. When the notion of genre is limited to descriptive uses, as it commonly is when serving distribution or classification purposes, we speak of ‘film genre’. However, when the notion of genre takes on a more active role in the production and consumption processes, we appropriately speak instead of ‘genre film’, thus recognizing the extent to which generic identification becomes a formative component of film viewing. (in Nowell-Smith 1997:277)

Our expectations as viewers are thus reinforced when we participate in the experience of “genre film”. This kind of ritual relationship that spectators establish with genre films follows theoretician Lévi-Strauss’s synchronic analysis within his generic context for the linguistic community. During the sixties and early seventies, the mythical features of Hollywood genres mentioned above were of particular interest to genre analysts and structuralist critics alike. To them, genres were conceived as neutral constructs and their semiotic genre analysis was based on the discursive power of generic formations. In

short, the interpretative community exercised an influence over genre, and therefore, it was more important to place an *a priori* meaning on a text regardless of a specific audience.

This notion contributes to a more conventional approach to text in which the analysis is grounded in a comparative overview of several *noir* productions and *noir* filmmakers. In this respect, I agree with Patricia Pisters when she writes about cinema genre:

In talking about cinema, I have been talking about life as well; however, I do not want to make too many claims. I am not arguing that this perspective offers in some sense a better view of the world (there is no hierarchy). I simply want to indicate that some mutations are taking place, both in the image and in the world. Developments in science, art and philosophy all indicate changes in perception and changes in our relation to the world. It may be that this involves a generational shift (...) Ultimately, we have no choice but to change. (Pisters 2003:223)

Although this may sound a bit too general, I cite these remarks because the “mutations (...) both in the image and in the world” were, back then, more like metamorphoses; they helped to achieve a generic cast to the individual image for each movie.

While some critics, like Thomas Sobchack, believe that “the subject matter of a genre film is a story” or that “[it] is not something that matters outside the film, even if it inadvertently tells us something about the time and place of its creation” (Sobchack 1975:196), one could argue that this does not lay sufficient emphasis on the fact that genres go through cycles of popularity even if the basic coordinates of genre have remained stable over time. This also reinforces what I explained above, that back in classic Hollywood, studios recognised that genres were part of the whole movie business’s drive for profitability, so well-established film companies sought identification with popular genres. Therefore, spectators were to a limited extent able to identify genres by the corporate names and logos of the studios. Thomas Sobchack also justifies the existence of genre as a way “to make concrete and perceivable the configuration inherent in its ideal form” (ibid.). In the case of *film noir*, the “ideal form” is implicit in its iconography. Furthermore, its “ideal form” is materialised through its narrative properties, or rather certain patterns of visual narration, delimited by a tangible timeframe (essentially from the forties and fifties).

On the whole, therefore, I consider that many of the theoretical problems of talking about genre have been overlooked, especially in the case of *film noir*. Genres are protean

constructions that make it difficult for genre theory to determine whether or where a given film fits within a finite taxonomy of genres, on the one hand, and to state whether it is bound to a certain culture and time (or rather if it is trans-cultural), on the other. As Andrew Tudor concludes:

Most uses of genre effectively invent answers to such questions by implicitly claiming to tap some archetypal characteristic of the genre, some universal human response. This depends on the particular context of the assumptions employed and on a more general notion of film language. To leap in with genre immediately is to put the cart before the horse. (Tudor 2003:10)

2 Towards an (Elusive) Definition of *Film Noir*

A dark street in the early morning hours, splashed with a sudden downpour. Lamps form haloes in the murk. In a walk-up room, filled with the intermittent flashing of a neon sign from across a street, a man is waiting to murder or be murdered (...) shadow upon shadow upon shadow... every shot in glistening low-key, so that rain always glittered across windows, or windscreens like quicksilver, furs shone with a faint halo, faces were barred deeply with those shadows that usually symbolized some imprisonment of body or soul. (Greenberg & Higham 1968:67)

Discussions about the essential nature of *noir*, and of how to apply theory to its understanding, have been extraordinarily intense. The continuing debate about the aesthetic principles of *film noir*, revolving round its qualities and intentions, stresses the complexity of its history and how elusive its definition might be. These questions normally focus on what defines *film noir*, what movies qualify as *noirs*, what type of category it is, and, at a more specific level, what the identifying characteristics of *noir* films might be.

In this analysis, I have tried to explain why films identified as dark cinema had evolved and become a leading style of studio production in the postwar era. *Noir* films were usually low-budget ventures, even so-called “A” productions, and offered a bleak vision of contemporary life in American cities. The fact that such films did not require expensive forms of spectacle, that they would use archetypal characters, with familiar plots and elements of setting, aided the work of the studios in keeping down costs and streamlining production.

When analysing the American film production of the forties, it is clear to see that the business practice in the major Hollywood studios (like MGM, Paramount, Fox, Warner Bros and RKO) began to move towards more marginal and low-budget production. In the years anticipating WWII, these so-called alternative films surfaced showing a more nihilistic and cynical side of life in contrast to the extravagance and optimism found in famous musicals, for example. In truth, the *noir* vision included a claustrophobic depiction of urban unease, as well as various facets of American social and cultural life.

Such factors have been scrutinised in this study, from the memories of the Depression, the alienation of returning veterans, the resultant tensions and insecurities of the time or the anxiety about the failure to produce generalised prosperity created by continuing economic instability, to the uncertainty about gender roles after the dislocation caused by the war, to the morbid fascination with abnormal psychology and the threat of nuclear annihilation. The reason for this methodical analysis was to make it possible to understand how these dark subtexts served the moral ambiguity and despair of their *noir* narratives and how they were metaphorical symptoms of the evils in society. All these features were also present in the way that *film noir*'s construction of gender was established, through its subversive questioning of the American society. When observing the profusion of frail, tormented male protagonists overwhelmed with psychosexual problems that existed in *noir*, one must posit the possible crisis in masculine identity that set in after the war. *Film noir* managed to look at this issue in a richly complex manner, as such films depicted uncharacteristic males and were not at all portrayed in the less expressionist social problem film. It presented male roles which endorsed a critical stance on American manhood. Various actors, notably Robert Mitchum and Kirk Douglas, as analysed in *Out of the Past*, gave their finest performances in *noir* productions. While *film noir* offered more space for women, its main emphasis was to demonise women's sexuality and to challenge the entire notion of the independent woman with an increased access to power and influence in the postwar world.

I have provided an analysis of cinematic trends that I estimate embodied a profound challenge to the dominant realist aesthetic. I have argued that within such a complex filmic arena as *film noir*, these cinematic trends of the forties expressed a new ontology of the cinematic image and text. *Noir* films comprised more experimental attempts with new techniques which challenged the limited agendas of mainstream film forms. At the same level, these traditions contributed to an alteration in the sphere of the spectator. The performance of the aesthetic spectacle is unavoidably discursive in its point of origin and summation. I have traced the formation of a classical realist *noir* aesthetic in the early studio era, drawing on the films and theorists I regard as having influenced the development of filmic traditions. Some of these new experiments took up a more personal and dramatic perspective at many different levels. From the narrative point of view, the voiceover narration is perhaps the production technique that created most impact on *film*

noir as the presence of an omniscient (non-diegetic) voice (often by a character reflecting back on their past) managed to generate ironic counterpoint, as is the case in *Sunset Boulevard*, for example.

As seen in section 1 of Part II, the emergence of popular literature in the thirties and forties, namely pulp magazines, contributed to the *noir* movement. These novels and stories presented exciting and lurid episodes, and ambiguously endorsed a thrilling desire to break laws and taboos, evoking all in all a (politically radical) view of the American society of that time. The hard-edged style used in these stories, closer to popular speech, was often expressed in a first-person narration, and was strongly based on the characteristics of the classic detective story. This fiction exhibited a multiplicity of styles (detective fiction, the thriller, and crime melodrama) which were very similar to the cinematic ones constituent of the *noir* style. Therefore, the hard-boiled school of American detective and crime fiction, led in its early years by such writers as Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain, constituted what Raymond Chandler called “The Simple Art of Murder” and is thus considered as one of the primary influences on *film noir*.

The opportunities that the Hollywood film industry was offering at that time, and later the menace of rising Nazi power, meant that many original film artists working in Germany, and other central European countries (particularly those of Jewish origin, like Otto Preminger, Edgar G. Ulmer, etc), found it difficult to survive and fled to the United States and ultimately to Hollywood. These were directors who had been in close contact with the Expressionist movement or studied with its followers. Several influential *auteurs*, such as Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak or Michael Curtiz, brought their creative lighting techniques and their technical expertise with them to Hollywood. This made them a very attractive commercial advantage for Hollywood, where they would make some of the most celebrated classic *noirs*. Some of these techniques were, for instance, the atypical camerawork, such as the high-angular tilted camera (for effective shots), or the eye-view (when the narrative is brought down to the first person, thus denying objectivity of vision), and the chiaroscuro contrastive lighting (for dense, atmospheric results). The high technical and aesthetical value brought to this body of films could therefore be perceived as a way of unsettling viewers, “forming a disruptive component of an American cinema that had habitually sought to reassure and comfort its audience” (Spicer 2002:2).

Thematically, *noir* films as a group were understood and marketed as belonging to other genres – the detective film, the woman’s picture, the thriller, and, most particularly, the crime melodrama or mystery. Film directors themselves did not even acknowledge a resemblance in the qualities that made these films dark. They were in fact seeking to advance their own positions in Hollywood, and also (indirectly) reacting to the American city and the speed of American life. With both A-productions and B-films during the early 1940s there was a strong inducement towards product differentiation. Furthermore, Hollywood was faced with a number of economic restrictions, initially caused by the exigencies of wartime production. Sound economics “dictated the recycling of existing sets, exploiting stock film from studio libraries, and generally minimising shooting times” (Silver&Ward 1992:34). Robert Sklar (1994:252-3) argues that not only did the material restrictions imposed on the film industry – a twenty-five percent reduction in the allocation of raw film stock to studios came into force in 1943, together with restrictions on the amount that could be spent on set design and décor – result in a general shift towards black and white thrillers that could be produced quite cheaply, but also encouraged an ideological shift that accepted more complicated and contentious plot subjects. In short, the flexibility of *film noir* made it a more profitable and cheaper proposition than many other types of motion picture. As discussed above, both major studios and the so-called Poverty Row outfits soon adapted to B-movie formats (of which many *noir* films were a part), run at the bottom of double bills, as a way to guarantee their profitability.

In the introduction I stated that the origin of *film noir* as a new twist in both wartime and postwar Hollywood cinema was subsequently analysed and discussed in French film criticism. However, the term did not emerge prominently in Anglo-American film criticism until the late 1960s and early 1970s. James Naremore points out that the *Zeitgeist* developing in France predisposed them “to see America in certain ways”, and in turn, Paul Schrader has suggested that “were it not for the war, *film noir* would have been at full steam by the early forties. The need to produce allied propaganda abroad and to promote patriotism at home blunted the fledgling moves toward a dark cinema (...) *Film noir* thrashed about in the studio system, not quite able to come into full prominence” (Schrader 1972:8-9). Although this might be questionable, *film noir* is frequently recognised as a postwar trend anticipated by the war. I have argued that pre- and post-war productions are to be distinguished as they reflect the changes of their time. Hence, before

the war, we have the moviegoer habituated to specific conventions that were intrinsic to American adventure films, with “a logical development of the action, a clear distinction between good and evil, well-defined characters, sharp motives, scenes more showy than authentically violent, a beautiful heroine and an honest hero” (Borde & Chaumeton 1996:24). The atmosphere represented in these films was predicated on the necessity to raise the American people’s morale, springing from the austerity of the Depression era.

Compared to what was to follow, World War II-era *noir* films were an immediate reaction to the new challenges and anxieties of wartime. Borde and Chaumeton noticed however that after the war the familiar reference points can no longer be found by the spectator who now notices how good and evil go hand in hand; how moral values lose their centrality; “the myth of Superman and his chaste fiancée” (2002:12) also fades; the logic of the action and the motives of the characters dissipate, creating a sense of chaos and estrangement in the spectator who, as Borde and Chaumeton conclude, “co-experience[s] the anguish and insecurity which are true emotions of contemporary *film noir*, whose aim was to create a *specific alienation*” (Borde & Chaumeton 1996:25, original emphasis). Schrader actually reiterates this by pointing out that:

As soon as the war was over, however, American films became markedly more sardonic – and there was a boom in the crime film. For fifteen years, the pressures against America’s amelioristic cinema had been building up, and given the freedom, audiences and artists were now eager to take a less optimistic view of things. The disillusionment many soldiers, small businessmen, and housewife / factory employees felt in returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the sordidness of the urban crime film. (Schrader 1972:9)

Therefore, wartime *film noir* is an important contributor to our understanding of American culture and society during World War II because these films reflect a different set of anxieties (war, shortages, anti-communism, etc) from those we see in the *noirs* of the postwar era and result from a diverse set of circumstances in the Hollywood production system. As Sheri Chinen Biesen states,

The wartime American sociocultural and Hollywood filmmaking climate also allowed more latitude in film content – endorsing more crime and violence, particularly sexual violence, in these motion pictures. The cultural, production, and censorship climate in the United States changed as the war progressed. Eventually, newsreels and other propaganda openly depicted combat violence, war crimes, and atrocities, undermining Hollywood’s moral patrol of the screen (Biesen 2005:7).

While enforcement of the Production Code (the precursor to the MPAA rating system) ensured that “no movie character could literally get away with murder” or “make criminals seem heroic and justified” (p. 471), the fact of the matter is that *noir* filmmakers, relatively free from the typical big-picture constraints of the studio system, would sometimes fly under the radar and present their protagonists awfully close to these situations. In the *Censorship and Politics* section, I have pointed out that studios were more or less forced to manufacture and market movies that were conservative, to a greater or lesser degree, both socially and politically. To provide the subject matter with interest and intrigue for a mass public, sometimes conventional A-films would deal with controversial or disturbing topics. Yet, everything was handled in an ultimately benign manner, and was expected to convey positive, reassuring messages to audiences. After all, the Production Code stated that “no picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it” (p. 465).

As its French name suggests, *film noir* is not an ordinary Hollywood “genre” (in truth, the term sounds more artistic in French and was hardly ever translated as “black cinema”). No director or screenwriter set out to make a film *noir*. Yet this was an American type of film that has proved an interesting exception to many of the film forms discussed, namely in terms of style, camerawork and editing techniques. Ironically, despite all this surface technique, many *noir* films were viewed as more realistic than ordinary Hollywood products, a feature of *noirs* often praised by American reviewers.

I have thus tried to explain that the connections between *noir* and realism (the eventual combination of *noir* themes with realist techniques, especially location shooting and documentary stylisation) are often intricate. They certainly were, however, a way of paying close critical attention to social and political affairs (some *noir* films could even be seen as being politically tendentious), and similarly, they were enjoyed by those who were bored with the moral patness of the usual American product. *La politique des auteurs* or *auteur* theory (its usual English rendering), discussed in section 2 of Part III, provided a similar perspective on Hollywood creators for French film culture. These directors could be considered and valued as *auteurs* because their films were felt to contain their own creative voices and to echo their own ideas, personified their own style, and refused to bow down to studio interference and be strictly commercial, at least from an ideological and aesthetical standpoint. This critical and evaluative approach, established and maintained by

the prominent journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, dominated French understanding of Hollywood for more than a decade, from the early fifties until political events and cultural changes began to make *auteurism* problematic in 1968 and after.

In their *Panorama du film noir américain*, French commentators Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton discussed the six major sources of American *film noir*. They emphasise three sociological ones, namely a new realism about violence brought about by World War II, an increase in the crime rate within American society and the extensive use of psychoanalysis. For the rest, they are to be found in the artistic context within the hard-boiled crime novel, European cinema, and certain Hollywood genres of the thirties – especially horror films, gangster movies and classic detective pictures. One particularity about this group of men from *Cahiers* and *Positif* is that they affectionately evoked the years of the mid-twenties by watching American gangster films that were “curious, non-conformist, and as *noir* as one could desire” (Borde & Chaumeton 2002:2). The representation of such behaviour, that is, by questioning the dominant order, would lead the surrealists to value the apparent content of such film genres (from silent and sound comedies to horror movies, for example). *Film noir* was not excluded either. In fact, when *Panorama* appeared Borde and Chaumeton had little to say about visual style; they rather referred to it as a *Zeitgeist* (see p. 146), and as James Naremore points out, they gave much importance to the topics of death and to the emotional qualities of the films, which they described with the five adjectives related to surrealism, mentioned above on p. 163.

Unlike the *Cahiers* circle, however, other leading (mainly British) film critics, writing for influential film journals and magazines (such as the British *Movie*), eventually moved from a purely auteurist view of American cinema to investigations of genre. Yet, *film noir* as such never became a major critical concern for such magazines, specifically *Movie*, for a long while; they rather concentrated on the characteristic entertainment genres of that time, notably the Hollywood Western. In fact, it was a critic outside the *Movie* group who published in August 1970, for the British journal *Cinema*, the first complete essay on *film noir* in English.

In his article echoing the Rolling Stones song of the time “Paint It Black”, Raymond Durgnat deviates from the thematic position assumed by Borde and Chaumeton regarding *film noir*, as for him these “dark” productions do not aim at presenting a significant and tendentiously political account of American culture. For him, *noir* movies

are “as often nihilistic, cynical or stoic as reformatory; there are Fascist and apathetic denunciations of the bourgeois order, as well as Marxist ones” (Durgnat 1970:49). Therefore, Durgnat accentuates the differentiation between denunciations of bourgeois society and a fairly confused and contradictory spirit of political protest found in dark cinema. Yet his approach remains very formalistic: “*film noir* is not a genre, as the Western or gangster film is, and takes us into the realms of classification by motif and tone” (in Silver & Ursini 1996:49). At this stage it is important to reiterate that the term *noir* did not originate in the United States either at the level of film criticism or contemporary industry jargon. Durgnat clearly stated that *noir* is potentially everywhere:

Black is as ubiquitous as shadow, and if the term *film noir* has a slightly exotic ring it's no doubt because it appears as figure against the rosy ground of Anglo-Saxon middle-class, and especially Hollywoodian, optimism and Puritanism. (Durgnat 1970:49)

Durgnat's metaphor of the tree (“Paint It Black: A family tree of *film noir*”) is very *apropos* in expressing the several branches that co-exist in this film categorisation. When encountering his sub-categories, the antecedents for *film noir* are indeed listed in their entirety – the influx of German émigrés and the influence of Expressionism; the arrival of French émigrés and the influence of existentialism; the hard-boiled school of writing; or even those American directors who were exposed to the French Poetic Realism, as seen in Section 1 of Part II.

Many other critics, including Paul Schrader, believe that it is difficult to tell *film noir* just from period of creation / production as the *noir* phenomenon became influential even after the fifties (in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, with its progeny, neo-*noir*). In popular culture in general, *noir* became a presence in other domains, from a continuing interest and fascination among painters and documentarists, in photography and television. It could be referred to as a “sensibility”, from the radical and subversive mystique it acquired as an alternative to mainstream Hollywood conservatism. In fact, it arguably served as a public conscience, documenting the darker moments in the history of American politics and society, a reflection of the production policies of its time.

My position in this thesis, especially throughout Parts IV (the semiotic analysis of key *noir* films) and V (troubles with genre analysis), has been to suggest that *film noir* is not a distinct genre or series but rather a “transgeneric” influence on films which addresses

criminal and libidinous behaviour, commonly found (but not exclusively) in the gangster and thriller genres. My critical approach throughout has been to consider *film noir* not so much from its (undeniable) sociological aspects (discussed in Part II), but rather for its artistic / formalist features, from an iconographic and visual point of view. From most contemporary linguistics and semiotics perspectives, the common assumption is that language, or any other system of transmitted signals (of which cinema is a part), is an instrument, a tool: “Language serves for the expression of ‘content’: that is, of the speaker’s expression of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness. We may call this the ideational function (...)” (Simpson 2004:61). Clearly this model of language rests on Peirce’s tripartite system (p. 260) for the study of signs, with its categories of meaning, which provide a much richer field for visual analysis, or on Christian Metz’s notion of visual representation (cine-semiotics, p. 264) leaning heavily on linguistic models.

I therefore conclude that *film noir*’s difference does not lay so much in the inversion of Hollywood conventions and the development of different themes (as suggested in Part III) but rather in the slight but perceptible modification of the social and emotional atmosphere, the tone in dominant cinema forms. In this regard, *film noir* operates as a matter of mood, manner and, as Durnat states, of tone. The semiotic analysis of the films in Part IV has enabled me to understand that tone or, more broadly, that style. Through the many recurrent symbols analysed in these films, I discovered that it is the application of a distinctive style with a consistent intentionality that best characterises the entire *noir* movement. The manipulation of all the elements – angle, framing, *mise-en-scène*, camera movement, duration of shot, optical effects, and montage – made *film noir* a tight compendium of visual styles. From the use of staircases and handrails or banisters with their spokes (as metaphors of entrapment) to the prison bars (sometimes just reflected from the dark shadows of objects that enclose the *noir* protagonists), the bar motif and cage wire (both literal and metaphorical) are perhaps the most recurrent elements in many *noir* films. Even a relatively natural open-air environment such as the one found for example in *Gun Crazy*, with its enmeshment of the two characters by reeds and narrow paths, has the connotation of fatality, entrapment and isolation from each other (see fig. 116 on p. 388). Moreover, *film noir* is not defined in terms of its content, setting or plot, and one should not forget the ambiguity that exists in *noir* characters and iconography, a characteristic

which is normally not associated with genre productions (though I am aware that ambiguity itself (cf. opacity of motive) can be a genre feature itself). Durnat's discussion of genre and its application to *film noir* is thus an important touchstone for defining the problem this analysis seeks to address:

Film noir is sometimes called a genre, but it's a moot point whether it's normally used for a perennial mood (a gloomy cynicism), or restricted to a particular historical epoch (around the Forties); whether it's a certain kind of a thriller, or whether it includes Westerns, domestic dramas, and normally unclassified films (*Citizen Kane*). Thus *noir* could signify an attitude, or a cycle, or a subgenre, or a tonality. (Durnat 1975:21)

Thus, I believe that *film noir* was more of a "transgeneric" form, a set of stylistic innovations that influenced many studios genres or, as Andrew Spicer puts it, "a discursive critical construction that has evolved over time" (Spicer 2002:24). In other words, *film noir* is a concept that has emerged and developed as film theorists and critics wrote about the phenomenon, but the new perspectives on crime and violence and public morality implied by these *noir* productions also found an echo in many other (though related) genres. In this study, I have situated *film noir* within a group of films that share a variety of similar visual approaches, narrative strategies, subject matters and character types, underlining indeed that *film noir* draws on a "literary tradition", yet this thesis has been questioning its place in a whole set of historical, social, and cultural frames. The critical concept of *film noir*, also through its hard-boiled school, managed to dramatically change the traditional narrative that Hollywood typically offered and that came to be marked as a rejection of the usual entertainment values by French film culture. Leading French directors such as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Claude Chabrol singled out *noir* conventions as providing a new film-viewing experience, one that would follow the philosophy of a "cinematic modernism" and potentially as endorsing a liberal / leftist perspective.

In other words, tone / style can also be a reflection of personality traits and of an individual approach. *Auteurists* have also frequently used the concept of tone to describe a director's visible modifications of the institutional features he/she has had to comply with under the American system. For this reason, perhaps, Paul Schrader has never given much attention to theme in *film noir* as in his view it is not defined by content: "Like its protagonists, *film noir* is more interested in style than theme" (in Simpson 2004:158). And, as it has been made abundantly clear in this study, American critics have been

characteristically more interested in theme than style. The manner in which *film noir* operates with theme embedded and subsumed in the style might possibly be the reason why sociological critics have always been more enthusiastic about the themes of the Western or the gangster film, shying away from the largely stylistic tools of analysis needed for *film noir*. Once again (see p. 5), it is worth recalling Schrader's remarks in his "Notes on *Film Noir*":

(...) because it worked out its conflicts visually rather than thematically, because it was aware of its own identity, [*film noir*] was able to create artistic solutions to sociological problems. And for these reasons films like *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* and *Gun Crazy* can be works of art in a way that gangster films like *Scarface*, *Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar* can never be. (Schrader 1972:14)

In Part V, "Genre Revisited", I have indicated that the antecedents of *film noir* are much more diverse than with any other film genres, like science fiction, for instance, or screwball comedy, which derive mostly from a pre-existing literary genre and a more or less specific period of American history. I have also concluded that, on the other hand, genre applications tend to lack fixed limits, and many works also extend into multiple genres. James Naremore also states that "Neither the industry nor the audience follows structuralist rules, and movie conventions have always been blended together in mongrelized ways" (Naremore 1998:6). In this respect, the quotation from Robert Stam on page 395 goes on:

Are genre timeless Platonic essences or ephemeral, time-bound entities? Are genres culture-bound or trans-cultural? Should genre analysis be descriptive or prescriptive? (...) While some genres are based on story content (the war film), other are borrowed from literature (comedy, melodrama) or from other media (the musical). Some are performed-based (the Astaire-Rogers films) or budget-based (blockbusters), while others are based on artistic status (the art film), racial identity (Black cinema), location (the Western) or sexual orientation (Queer cinema). (Stam 2000:14)

Film noir was more of an innovative set of stylistic tropes that influenced many studio genres or, as said above, "a discursive critical construction that has evolved over time". In other words, it is a concept that has developed as film theorists and critics have written about the phenomenon but the new perspectives on crime and violence and public

morality brought about by these *noirs* were articulated in many different (though related) genres.

Durgnat's article, on the other hand, has also been pertinent to the subsequent development of *film noir* as a critical concept. He underlined the idea that *noir* was characterised by a tone (rather than rhetoric of affect, for example) and that *noirs* manifest a puzzling variety of themes instead of a core unity based upon a particular treatment of crime. The titles in the list of the films that follows serve to cue in narrative expectations and to suggest the thematic and tonal similarities among the films:

a) the repetition of 'key words' such as 'street', in for example, *Panic in the Streets* (1950), *Street of Chance* (1942), *Side Street* (1950), *Scarlet Street* (1952); 'city', e.g. *The Sleeping City* (1950), *Cry of the City* (1948), *Night and the City* (1950); and 'dark' and 'night', e.g. *The Dark City* (1950), *The Dark Passage* (1947), *The Dark Past* (1948), *The Dark Corner* (1946), *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948), *The Dark Mirror* (1946), *So Dark the Night* (1946).

b) the use of expressions from the hard-boiled crime idiom (as with *Framed* (1947), *Decoy* (1946), *Fall Guy* (1947), *Raw Deal* (1948), *The Set-Up* (1949), *The Mob* (1951), *On Dangerous Ground* (1952).

c) the suggestion of a fatalistic or existential thematic, or moods of despair and paranoia, with obsession and alienation, e.g. *Edge of Doom* (1950), *They Won't Believe Me* (1947), *Cornered* (1945), *I Walk Alone* (1948), *Criss-Cross* (1949), *Desperate* (1947) and *Fear* (1946).

d) the promise of a delirious combination of violence, death, and sexuality, as in *Kiss of Death* (1947), *Kiss the Blood off My Hands* (1948), *Killer's Kiss* (1955), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *Murder Is My Beat* (1955).

(Hirsch 1981:10)

These major relationships attached to *film noir* are therefore significant as they also highlight the multiple aspects that these films represent. Moreover, the idea of a shared tone posits the theory that *film noir* resulted from a collective *auteurism*, that is, from the similar stylistic subversions that many directors used within the American system (it might in this sense be the creation of cinematographers rather than writers or directors). I have acknowledged throughout this study that the stylistic qualities of *film noir*, specifically its visual motifs, are important characteristics that unify these films, though they need to be articulated with a specific *mise-en-scène* that controls the conception of character and limits the possibilities of action. *Noir*, then, could be seen as the product of a (stylistic)

movement. In harnessing “a particular way of looking at the world”, as quoted above, *noir* wants to express an outlook on life and human existence, based on the central concept of *Stimmung* (p. 103) - a term very much associated with expressionist filmmaking. Visual experimentation – especially coming from filmmakers familiar with exterior and low-key photography or influenced by their heritage of German Expressionism - created this embracing *Stimmung* (mood) or texture, dependent on a distinct visual style that used moving camera, oddly angled shots, high contrast between light and dark shading, eccentric set designs, dream-like haziness, and a chiaroscuro framing of events.

In his widely influential article, Paul Schrader encouraged viewers and readers to revisit classic Hollywood crime films. Understanding that the French had had a major role in identifying *film noir*, Schrader states that this body of films holds even more interest for the cinephiles and cineastes of the early 1970s in the United States: “Hollywood’s *film noir* has recently become the subject of renewed interest among moviegoers and critics. (...) American movies are again taking a look at the underside of the American character” (Schrader 1972:15). These neo-*noir* productions from across the Atlantic formed an art cinema exemplified by a stimulating mixture of cinematic modernism with typically dark themes, structures, and techniques.

In trying to answer the question of why *noir* has become so important, James Naremore also suggests a “cinematic modernism” that facilitated the film industry and made it even more valuable and lucrative, also for the Hollywood *auteurs*: “If we could ask the original French commentators what American *film noir* represented, they might agree that it was a kind of modernism in the popular cinema: it used unorthodox narration; it resisted sentiment and censorship; it revelled in the ‘social fantastic’; it demonstrated the ambiguity of human motives (...)” (Naremore 1998:38). These directors – from what is known as the “Hollywood Renaissance” or “The American New Wave” (men such as Arthur Penn, Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman, and Martin Scorsese) – were key contributors to the marriage of art and commercial cinema that prospered in America in the early and mid seventies. Their films looked back at classic American crime cinema for inspiration, and found many models, mainly in *film noir*, for their re-inventions of movie violence and motivation. For example, Schrader’s own screenplay for *Taxi Driver* (1976) was a key film in the makeover that is neo-*noir*.

It is within this cinematic and critical context that Schrader presented his view of *film noir*. As he says, “*Film noir* is (...) interesting to critics. It offers writers a cache of excellent, little-known films (...) and gives auteur-weary critics an opportunity to apply themselves to the newer questions of classification and transdirectorial style” (in Chartier 1946:69). This “transdirectorial style” implies the common way of working of film artists as a group or as part of a movement. Thinking of *film noir* as a movement enabled Schrader to value classic Hollywood filmmaking without confining its meaning to the *oeuvres* of a few brilliant creators. For this reason, Schrader theorises *film noir* as an available style, in other words, a collective subversion of norms: “[*Film noir*] tried to make America accept a moral vision of life based on style (...). *Film noir* attacked and interpreted its sociological conditions, and, by the close of the *noir* period, created a new artistic world which went beyond a simple sociological reflection, a nightmarish world of American mannerism which was by far more a creation than a reflection” (Schrader 1972:16).

Film noir has thus to some extent assumed the position of cinematic modernism, as an alternative form of production that surprisingly was adopted and nurtured within the studio system. *Noir* productions are still commercial Hollywood films, and by “surprisingly” I do not mean that *film noir* ought to be understood as counter-cinema, arising unaccountably from within, like some body-snatching alien pod. One should not ignore the fact for example that *film noir* is not *exclusively* an “indigenous American form”, as some theorists might affirm. British cinema from the same period has possibly the second most comprehensive body of *noir* films, with their own energy and individuality. Future research could profitably focus on a comparative analysis of the two sides of the Atlantic regarding *film noir* and study the extent to which it also constituted a vehicle for the exploration of social and sexual matters under the surface of British life.

Finally, and in conclusion, in this argument, I wish to bring out that this dark form of cinema supplies an alternative vision of American culture. Because that dark cinema offered a different experience to its audience (*film noir* representing a critical area of divergence within homogenizing Hollywood practice), it remains important to bear witness to *noir*’s complex confluence of cinematic and literary influences, many of them foreign. It is the role of criticism to establish the exact nature of this difference, even when it can sometimes seem to be one of fine distinctions and of interpretative difficulty.

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The Internet Movie Database: **<http://www.imdb.com>**, which is an online database of information related to movies, actors, television shows, production crew personnel, video games, and most recently, fictional characters featured in visual entertainment media.

Martin's *Film Noir* page: **<http://www.martinsfilmnoir.com>**, which is a site totally dedicated to *film noir* and has links to many web articles, images and other *noir* sites.

JSTOR: **<http://www.jstor.org>** is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization helping the academic community use digital technologies to preserve the scholarly record and to advance research and teaching in sustainable ways and offers multi-disciplinary and discipline-specific collections that include complete runs of journals as well as select monographs, transactions, etc.

InformaWorldTM: **<http://www.informaworld.com>** is a one-stop site hosting journals, eBooks, abstract databases and reference works.

The British Film Institute: **<http://www.bfi.org.uk>** holds runs of all the important journals and articles. Its library has the most important collection of books and other materials for the study of film in the United Kingdom.

"The Dark Room": **http://www.cinepad.com/filmnoir/noir_intro.htm** is an interesting site created by Jim Emerson which introduces *noir* iconography and also has direct links to other *noir* sites.

"The Arch of National Confidence and the Birth of *Film Noir*, 1929-1941"
(<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=2871988>)

Prince of Darkness, article taken from *The Guardian*, April 13, 2001. (website: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2001/apr/13/features>)

Appendix I: Annotated Filmography

The following list gives all the relevant works that I have viewed and consulted in the course of this study. The year that appears after the name of the studio abbreviations is the one that corresponds to the year when the film was first released. Where sources conflict, I have opted for the majority decision. Regarding the cast, I have given the names of the first five top-billed actors in each film.

A) *Noir* Filmography

Abbreviations

Prod: Producer
Dir: Director
Scr: Scriptwriter
Ph: Director of photography

Studio main abbreviations

AA: Allied Artists
Carillon: Carillon Films
Col: Columbia
EL: Eagle Lion Films
Ealing: Ealing Studios
Fox: 20th Century-Fox Film Corporation
Gainsborough: Gainsborough Pictures
Gamma: Gamma Films
Hammer: Hammer Film Productions
MGM: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Mono: Monogram Pictures
Ortus: Ortus Films Production
Par: Paramount Pictures
Pinewood: Pinewood Studios
PRC: Producers Releasing Corporation
Rep: Republic Pictures Corporation
RKO: RKO-Radio Pictures
Sol: Sol Lesser Productions
UA: United Artists Corporation
Univ: Universal Pictures
UI: Universal-International
WB: Warner Brothers Pictures, Inc.

Abandoned

Univ 1949. Prod: Jerry Bresler. Dir: Joseph M. Newman. Scr: Irwin Gielgud, with additional dialogues by William Bowers; from articles published in the *Los Angeles Mirror*. Ph: William Daniels. Cast: Dennis O'Keefe, Gale Storm, Jeff Chandler, Raymond Burr, Marjorie Rambeau.

Ace in the Hole [aka *The Big Carnival*]

Par 1951. Prod/Dir: Billy Wilder. Scr: Billy Wilder, Lesser Samuels, and Walter Newman. Ph: Charles B. Lang. Cast: Kirk Douglas, Jan Sterling, Robert Arthur, Porter Hall, Frank Cady.

Act of Violence

MGM 1949. Prod: William H. Wright. Dir: Fred Zinnemann. Scr: Robert L. Richards; from an unpublished story by Collier Young. Ph: Robert Surtees. Cast: Van Heflin, Robert Ryan, Janet Leigh, Mary Astor, Phyllis Thaxter.

Affair in Trinidad

Col 1952. Prod/Dir: Vincent Sherman. Scr: Berne Giler and James Gunn; from a story by Virginia van Upp. Ph: Joseph Walker. Cast: Glenn Ford, Rita Hayworth, Alexander Scourby, Valerie Bettis, Torin Thatcher.

Among the Living

Par 1941. Prod: Sol C. Siegel. Dir: Stuart Heisler. Scr: Lester Cole and Garrett Fort; from an unpublished story by Brian Marlow and Lester Cole. Ph: Theodor Sparkhul. Cast: Albert Dekker, Susan Hayward, Harry Carey, Frances Farmer, Gordon Jones.

Angel Face

RKO 1952. Prod/Dir: Otto Preminger. Scr: Oscar Millard and Frank Nugent, from a Chester Erskine story. Ph: Harry Stradling. Cast: Robert Mitchum, Jean Simmons, Mona Freeman, Herbert Marshall, Leon Ames.

Armored Car Robbery

RKO 1950. Prod: Herman Schlom. Dir: Richard Fleischer. Scr: Earl Felton and Gerald Drayson Adams; from a story by Robert Angus and Robert Leeds. Ph: Guy Roe. Cast: Charles McGraw, Adele Jergens, William Talman, Douglas Fowley, Steve Brodie.

Asphalt Jungle, The

MGM 1950. Prod: Arthur Hornblow. Dir: John Huston. Scr: Ben Maddow and John Huston, from the novel by W.R. Burnett. Ph: Harold Rosson. Cast: Sterling Hayden, Louis Calhern, Jean Hagen, James Whitmore, Sam Jaffe.

Behind Locked Doors

EL 1948. Prod: Eugene Ling. Dir: Oscar Boetticher, Jr. Scr: Malvin Wald and Eugene Ling; from an unpublished story by Malvin Wald. Ph: Guy Roe. Cast: Lucille Bremer, Richard Carlson, Douglas Fowley, Thomas Browne Henry, Herbert Heyes.

Beware, My Lovely

RKO 1952. Prod: Collier Young. Dir: Harry Horner. Scr: Mel Dinelli; from his play and short story *The Man*. Ph: George E. Diskant. Cast: Ida Lupino, Robert Ryan, Taylor Holmes, Barbara Whiting, James Williams.

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt

RKO 1056. Prod: Bert Friedlob. Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Douglas Morrow. Ph: William Snyder. Cast: Dana Andrews, Joan Fontaine, Sidney Blackmer, Philip Bourneuf, Shepperd Strudwick.

Big Clock, The

Par 1948. Prod: Richard Malbaum. Dir: John Farrow. Scr: Jonathan Latimer, from the Kenneth Fearing novel. Ph: Daniel L. Lapp, John F. Seitz. Cast: Ray Milland, Charles Laughton, Maureen O'Sullivan, George Macready, Rita Johnson.

Big Combo, The

Allied Artists 1955. Prod: Sidney Harmon. Dir: Joseph Lewis. Scr: Philip Yordan. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Cornel Wilde, Richard Conte, Brian Donlevy, Jean Wallace, Robert Middleton.

Big Heat, The

Col 1953. Prod: Robert Arthur. Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Sydney Boehme; from the novel by William P. McGivern. Ph: Charles Lang. Cast: Glenn Ford, Gloria Grahame, Jocelyn Brando, Alexander Scourby, Lee Marvin.

Big Knife, The

UA 1955. Prod/Dir: Robert Aldrich. Scr: James Poe; from the play by Clifford Odets. Ph: Ernest Laszlo. Cast: Jack Palance, Ida Lupino, Wendell Corey, Jean Hagen, Rod Steiger.

Big Sleep, The

WB 1946. Prod: Jack L. Warner, Howard Hughes. Dir: Howard Hawks. Scr: William Faulkner, Jules Furthman, Leigh Brackett, from the Raymond Chandler novel. Ph: Sid Hickox. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, John Ridgely, Martha Vickers, Dorothy Malone.

Big Steal, The

RKO 1949. Prod: Jack J. Gross. Dir: Don Siegel. Scr: Geoffrey Homes and Gerald Drayson Adams, from the Saturday Evening Post story *The Road to Carmichael's*. Ph: Harry J. Wild. Cast: Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer, William Bendix, Patric Knowles, Ramon Navarro.

Black Angel

Univ 1946. Prod: Tom McKnight, Roy William Neill. Dir: Roy William Neill. Scr: Roy Chanslor, from the Cornell Woolrich novel. Ph: Paul Ivano. Cast: Dan Dureya, June Vincent, Peter Lorre, Broderick Crawford, Constance Dowling.

Blue Gardenia, The

WB 1953. Prod: Alex Gottlieb. Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Charles Hoffman; from the short story "Gardenia" by Vera Caspary. Ph: Nicholas Musuraca. Cast: Anne Baxter, Richard Conte, Ann Sothern, Raymond Burr, Jeff Donnell.

Boomerang!

Fox 1947. Prod: Louis De Rochemont. Dir: Elia Kazan. Scr: Richard Murphy. Ph: Norbert Brodine. Cast: Dana Andrews, Jane Wyatt, Lee J. Cobb, Cara Williams, Arthur Kennedy.

Border Incident

MGM 1949. Prod: Nicholas Nayfack. Dir: Anthony Mann. Scr: John C. Higgins; from an unpublished story by John C. Higgins and George Zuckerman. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Ricardo Montalban, George Murphy, Howard da Silva, James Mitchell, Arnold Moss.

Breaking Point, The

WB 1950. Prod: Jerry Wald. Dir: Michael Curtiz. Scr: Ranald MacDougall; from the novel *To Have and Have Not* by Ernest Hemingway. Ph: Ted McCord. Cast: John Garfield, Patricia Neal, Phyllis Thaxter, Juano Hernandez, Wallace Ford.

Brute Force

UI 1947. Prod: Mark Hellinger. Dir: Jules Dassin. Scr: Richard Brooks; from an unpublished story by Robert Patterson. Ph: William Daniels. Cast: Burt Lancaster, Hume Cronyn, Charles Bickford, Yvonne De Carlo, Ann Blyth.

Bury Me Dead

Eagle-Lion 1947. Prod: Charles Reisner. Dir: Bernard Vorhaus. Scr: Dwight V. Babcock. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Cathy O'Donnell, June Lockhart, Hugh Beaumont, Mark Daniels, Greg McClure.

Call Northside 777

Fox 1948. Prod: Otto Lang. Dir: Henry Hathaway. Scr: Jerome Cady and Jay Dratler, adapted by Leonard Hoffman and Quentin Reynolds; from *Chicago Times* articles by James P. McGuire. Ph: Joe MacDonald. Cast: James Stewart, Richard Conte, Lee J. Cobb, Helen Walker, Betty Garde.

Cause for Alarm!

MGM 1951. Prod: Tom Lewis. Dir: Tay Garnett. Scr: Mel Dinelli and Tom Lewis; from an unpublished story by Larry Marcus. Ph: Joseph Rutenberg. Cast: Loretta Young, Barry Sullivan, Bruce Cowling, Margalo Gillmore, Bradley Mora.

Chase, The

UA 1946. Prod: Seymour Nebenzal. Dir: Arthur Ripley. Scr: Philip Yordan. Ph: Franz F. Planer. Cast: Michele Morgan, Robert Cummings, Steve Cochran, Lloyd Corrigan, Jack Holt.

Christmas Holiday

Univ 1944. Prod: Frank Shaw. Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Herman J. Mankiewicz; from the novel by W. Somerset Maugham. Ph: Woody Bredell. Cast: Deanne Durbin, Gene Kelly, Richard Whorf, Dean Harens, Gladys George.

Citizen Kane

RKO 1941. Prod/Dir: Orson Welles. Scr: Herman J. Mankiewicz, Orson Welles. Ph: Gregg Toland. Cast: Orson Welles, Joseph Cotten, Dorothy Comingore, Agnes Moorehead.

City of Fear

Col 1959. Prod: Leon Chooluck. Dir: Irving Lerner. Scr: Robert Dillon and Steven Ritch. Ph: Lucien Ballard. Cast: Vince Edwards, Lyle Talbot, John Archer, Steven Ritch, Patricia Blair.

City That Never Sleeps

Rep 1953. Prod: Herbert J. Yates. Dir: John H. Auer. Scr: Steve Fisher. Ph: John L. Russell, Jr. Cast: Gig Young, Mala Powers, William Talman, Edward Arnold, Chill Wills.

Clash by Night

RKO 1952. Prod: Harriet Parsons. Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Alfred Hayes, with contribution by David Dortort; from the play by Clifford Odets. Ph: Nicholas Musuraca. Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Paul Douglas, Robert Ryan, Marilyn Monroe, J. Carroll Naish.

Conflict

WB 1945. Prod: William Jacobs. Dir: Curtis Bernhardt. Scr: Arthur T. Horman and Dwight Taylor; from the story *The Pentacle* by Alfred Neumann. Ph: Merritt B. Gerstad. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Alexis Smith, Sydney Greenstreet, Rose Hobart, Charles Drake.

Count the Hours

WB 1953. Prod: Benedict Bogeaus. Dir: Don Siegel. Scr: Doane R. Hoag and Karen DeWolf. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Teresa Wright, MacDonald Carey, Dolores Moran, Adele Mara, Edgar Barrier.

Crack-Up

RKO 1946. Prod: Jack J. Gross. Dir: Irving Reis. Scr: John Paxton, Ben Bengal, and Ray Spencer; from the short story "Madman's Holiday" by Fredric Brown. Ph: Robert de Grasse. Cast: Pat O'Brien, Claire Trevor, Herbert Marshall, Ray Collins, Wallace Ford.

Crime of Passion

UA 1957. Prod: Herman Cohen. Dir: Gerd Oswald. Scr: Jo Eisinger. Ph: Joseph LaSelle. Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Sterling Hayden, Raymond Burr, Fay Wray, Royal Dano.

Crime Wave

WB 1954. Prod: Bryan Foy. Dir: Andre de Toth. Scr: Crane Wilbur, adapted by Bernard Gordon and Richard Wormser; from the *Saturday Evening Post* story "Criminal Mark" by John and Ward Hawkins. Ph: Bert Glennon. Cast: Gene Nelson, Phyllis Kirk, Sterling Hayden, James Bell, Ted De Corsia.

Crimson Kimono, The

Col 1959. Prod/Dir/Scr: Samuel Fuller (Globe Enterprises). Ph: Sam Leavitt. Cast: Victoria Shaw, Glenn Corbett, James Shigeta, Anna lee, Paul Dubov.

Criss Cross

Univ 1949. Prod: Michel Kraike. Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Daniel Fuchs, from the Don Tracy novel. Ph: Frank Planer. Cast: Burt Lancaster, Yvonne De Carlo, Dan Dureya, Stephen McNally, Richard Long.

Crooked Way, The

UA 1949. Prod: Benedict Bogeaus. Dir: Robert Florey. Scr: Richard H. Landau, from the radio play *No Blade Too Sharp*. Ph: John Alton. Cast: John Payne, Sonny Tufts, Ellen Drew, Rhys Williams, Percy Helton.

Crooked Web, The

Col 1955. Prod: Sam Katzman. Dir: Nathan Juran. Scr: Lou Breslow. Ph: Henry Freulich. Cast: Frank Lovejoy, Mari Blanchard, Richard Denning, John Mylong, Harry Lauter.

Cry Danger

RKO 1951. Prod: Sam Wiesensthal and W.R. Frank. Dir: Robert Parrish. Scr: William Bowers, from an unpublished story by Jerome Cady. Ph: Joseph F. Biroc. Cast: Dick Powell, Rhonda Fleming, Richard Erdman, William Conrad, Regis Toomey.

Cry of the City

Fox 1948. Prod: Sol Siegel. Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Richard Murphy; from the novel *The Chair for Martin Rome* by Henry Edward Helseth. Ph: Lloyd Ahern. Cast: Victor Mature, Richard Conte, Fred Clark, Shelley Winters, Betty Garde.

Cry of the Hunted

MGM 1953. Prod: William Grady, Jr. Dir: Joseph H. Lewis. Scr: Jack Leonard. Ph: Harold Lipstein. Cast: Vittorio Gassman, Barry Sullivan, Polly Bergen, William Conrad, Mary Zavian.

D.O.A.

Harry M. Popkin Production 1950. Prod: Leo C. Popkin. Dir: Rudolph Maté. Scr: Russell Rouse and Clarence Green. Ph: Ernest Laszlo. Cast: Edmond O'Brien, Pamela Britton, Luther Adler, Beverly Campbell, Lynn Baggett.

Damned Don't Cry, The

WB 1950. Prod: Jerry Wald. Dir: Vincent Sherman. Scr: Harold Medford and Jerome Weidman, from a story by Gertrude Walker. Ph: Ted McCord. Cast: Joan Crawford, David Brian, Steve Cochran, Kent Smith, Hugh Sanders.

Dangerous Crossing

Fox 1953. Prod: Robert Bassler. Dir: Joseph M. Newman. Scr: John Dickson Carr and Leo Townsend. Ph: Joseph LaShelle. Cast: Jeanne Crain, Michael Rennie, Max Showalter, Carl Betz, Mary Anderson.

Dark Corner, The

Fox 1946. Prod: Fred Kohlmar. Dir: Henry Hathaway. Scr: Jay Dratler, Bernard Schoenfeld, from the Leo Rosten story. Ph: Joe MacDonald. Cast: Mark Stevens, Lucille Ball, Clifton Webb, William Bendix, Cathy Downs.

Dark Mirror, The

Univ 1946. Prod: Nunnally Johnson. Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Nunnally Johnson; from a Vladimir Pozner novel. Ph: Milton Krasner. Cast: Olivia de Havilland, Lew Ayres, Thomas Mitchell, Richard Long, Charles Evans.

Dark Passage

WB 1947. Prod: Jerry Wald. Dir: Delmer Daves. Scr: Delmer Daves, from the David Goodis novel. Ph: Sid Hickox. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Bruce Bennett, Tom d'Andrea, Agnes Moorehead.

Dark Past, The

Col 1948. Prod: Buddy Adler. Dir: Rudolph Maté. Scr: Philip MacDonald, Michael Blankfort, and Albert Duffy, adapted by Malvin Wald, and Oscar Saul; from the play *Blind Alley* by James Warmick. Ph: Joseph Walker. Cast: William Holden, Nina Foch, Lee J. Cobb, Adele Jergens, Stephen Dunne.

Dead Reckoning

Col 1947. Prod: Sidney Biddell. Dir: John Cromwell. Scr: Oliver H.P. Garrett and Steve Fisher; adapted by Allen Rivkin; from an unpublished story by Gerald Adams and Sidney Biddell. Ph: Leo Tover. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Lizabeth Scott, Morris Carnovsky, Charles Cane, William Prince.

Deadline at Dawn

RKO 1946. Prod: Adrian Scott. Dir: Harold Clurman. Scr: Clifford Odets; from the novel by William Irish [Cornell Woolrich]. Ph: Nicholas Musuraca. Cast: Susan Hayward, Paul Lukas, Bill Williams, Joseph Calleia, Osa Masson.

Decoy

Mono 1946. Prod: Jack Bernhard and Bernard Brandt. Dir: Jack Bernhard. Scr: Ned Young, from an unpublished story by Stanley Rubin. Ph: L.W. O'Connell. Cast: Jean Gillie, Edward Norris, Herbert Rudley, Robert Armstrong, Sheldon Leonard.

Desert Fury

Par 1947. Prod: Hal B. Wallis. Dir: Lewis Allen. Scr: A.I Bezzerides and Robert Rossen; based on the novel by Ramona Stewart. Ph: Edward Cronjager and Charles Lang. Cast: John Hodiak, Lizabeth Scott, Burt Lancaster, Wendell Corey, Mary Astor.

Desperate Hours

Par 1955. Prod/Dir: William Wyler. Scr: Joseph Hayes; from a Joseph Hayes novel. Ph: Lee Garmes. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Fredric March, Arthur Kennedy, Martha Scott, Dewey Martin.

Detour

PRC (Producers Releasing Corporation) 1945. Prod: Leon Fromkess. Dir: Edgar G. Ulmer. Scr: Martin Goldsmith. Ph: Benjamin H. Kline. Cast: Tom Neal, Ann Savage, Claudia Drake, Edmund MacDonald, Tim Ryan.

Double Indemnity

Par 1944. Prod: Buddy G. DeSylva. Dir: Billy Wilder. Scr: Billy Wilder, Raymond Chandler, from the novel by James M. Cain. Ph: John F. Seitz. Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Fred MacMurray, Edward G. Robinson, Porter Hall, Jean Heather.

Double Life, A

UI 1948. Prod: Michael Kanin. Dir: George Cukor. Scr: Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin. Ph: Milton Krasner. Cast: Ronald Colman, Signe Hasso, Edmond O'Brien, Shelley Winters, Ray Collins.

Edge of Doom

RKO 1950. Prod: Samuel Goldwyn. Dir: Mark Robson, with additional scenes by Charles Vidor. Scr: Philip Yordan, with additional scenes by Ben Hecht; from the novel by Leo Brady. Ph: Harry Stradling. Cast: Dana Andrews, Farley Granger, Joan Evans, Robert Keith, Paul Stewart.

Enforcer, The

WB 1951. Prod: Milton Sperling. Dir: Bretaigne Windust, Raoul Walsh (uncredited). Scr: Martin Rackin. Ph: Robert Burks. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Zero Mostel, Everett Sloane, Ted De Corsia, Michael Tolan.

Face Behind the Mask, The

Col 1941. Prod: Irving Briskin. Dir: Robert Florey. Scr: Paul Jarrico and Allen Vincent. Ph: Franz Planer. Cast: Peter Lorre, Evelyn Keyes, Don Beddoe, George E. Stone, John Tyrrell.

Fallen Angel

Fox 1946. Prod/Dir: Otto Preminger. Scr: Harry Kleiner, from the Marty Holland novel. Ph: Joseph LaSelle. Cast: Alice Faye, Dana Andrews, Linda Darnell, Charles Bickford, Anne Revere.

File on Thelma Jordan, The

Par 1950. Prod: Hal B. Wallis. Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Ketti Frings; from an unpublished story by Marty Holland. Ph: George Barnes. Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Wendell Corey, Paul Kelly, Joan Tetzl, Stanley Ridges.

Force of Evil

MGM 1948. Prod: Bob Roberts. Dir: Abraham Polonsky. Scr: Abraham Polonsky and Ira Wolfert; from the novel *Tucker's People* by Ira Wolfert. Ph: George Barnes. Cast: John Garfield, Beatrice Pearson, Thomas Gomez, Howland Chamberlain, Roy Roberts.

Framed

Col 1947. Prod: Jules Scherner. Dir: Richard Wallace. Scr: Ben Maddow; from an unpublished story by Jack Patrick. Ph: Burnett Guffey. Cast: Glenn Ford, Janis Carter, Barry Sullivan, Edgar Buchanan, Karen Morley.

Fury

MGM 1936. Prod: Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Barlett Cormack and Fritz Lang; from the story "Mob Rule" by Norman Krasna. Ph: Joseph Ruttenberg. Cast: Spencer Tracy, Sylvia Sydney, Walter Abel, Edward Ellis, Walter Abel.

Gangster, The

AA 1947. Prod: Maurice and Frank King (King Brothers). Dir: Gordon Wiles. Scr: Daniel Fuchs; from his novel *Low Company*. Ph: Paul Ivano. Cast: Barry Sullivan, Belita, Joan Lorrying, Akim Tamiroff, Henry Morgan.

Gilda

Col 1946. Prod: Virginia van Upp. Dir: Charles Vidor. Scr: Marion Parsonnet, from an original story by E.A. Ellington. Ph: Rudolph Maté. Cast: Rita Hayworth, Glenn Ford, George Macready, Joseph Calleia, Steven Geray.

Glass Key, The

Par 1942. Prod: Fred Kohlmar and Buddy G. DeSylva. Dir: Stuart Heisler. Scr: Jonathan Latimer; from Dashiell Hammett's novel *The Glass Key*. Ph: Theodor Sparkuhl. Cast: Alan Ladd, Veronica Lake, Brian Donlevy, Joseph Calleia, Richard Denning.

Glass Wall, The

Col 1953. Prod: Ivan Tors. Dir: Maxwell Shane. Scr: Ivan Shane and Maxwell Shane. Ph: Joseph F. Biroc. Cast: Vittorio Gassman, Gloria Grahame, Ann Robinson, Douglas Spencer, Robin Raymond.

Gun Crazy

UA 1950. Prod: King Bros. Dir: Joseph H. Lewis. Scr: MacKinlay Kantor, Millard Kaufman (as front from for Dalton Trumbo), from a MacKinlay Kantor story. Ph: Russell Harlan. Cast: Peggy Cummins, John Dall, Berry Kroeger, Morris Carnovsky, Anabel Shaw.

Hangover Square

Fox 1945. Prod: Robert Bassler. Dir: John Brahm. Scr: Patrick Hamilton and Barré Lyndon. Ph: Joseph LaSelle. Cast: Laird Cregar, Linda Darnell, George Sanders, Glenn Langan, Faye Marlowe.

Hard Way, The

WB 1943. Prod: Jerry Wald. Dir: Vincent Sherman. Scr: Daniel Fuchs and Peter Viertel. Ph: James Wong Howe. Cast: Ida Lupino, Dennis Morgan, Joan Leslie, Jack Carson, Gladys George.

Hell's Five Hours

Par 1958. Prod: Jack L. Copeland and Walter Hannemann. Dir: Jack L. Copeland. Scr: Jack L. Copeland. Ph: Ernest Haller. Cast: Stephen McNally, Coleen Gray, Vic Morrow, Maurice Manson, Robert Foulk.

Hell's Half Acre

Republic 1954. Prod/Dir: John H. Auer. Scr: Steve Fisher. Ph: John L. Russell. Cast: Wendell Corey, Evelyn Keyes, Elsa Lanchester, Marie Windsor, Nancy Gates.

He Ran All The Way

UA 1951. Prod: Bob Roberts. Dir: John Berry. Scr: Guy Endore and Hugo Butler; from the novel by Sam Ross [Uncredited: Dalton Trumbo]. Ph: James Wong Howe. Cast: John Garfield, Shelley Winters, Wallace Ford, Selena Royle, Bobby Hyatt.

He Walked By Night

Eagle-Lion 1948. Prod: Robert T. Kane. Dir: Alfred Werker. Scr: J.C. Higgins, from a Crane Wilbur story. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Richard Basehart, Scott Brady, Roy Roberts, Whit Bissell, Jimmy Cardwell.

High Sierra

WB 1941. Prod: Hal B. Wallis. Dir: Raoul Walsh. Scr: John Huston and W.R. Burnett; from the novel by W.R. Burnett. Ph: Tony Gaudio. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Ida Lupino, Alan Curtis, Arthur Kennedy, Joan Leslie.

Highway 301

WB 1950. Prod: Brian Foy. Dir/Scr: Andrew L. Stone. Ph: Carl E. Guthrie. Cast: Steve Cochran, Virginia Grey, Gaby André, Edmond Ryan, Robert Webber.

High Wall

MGM 1947. Prod: Robert Lord. Dir: Curtis Bernhardt. Scr: Sydney Boehm and Lester Cole; from the novel and play by Alan R. Clark and Bradbury Foote. Ph: Paul Vogel. Cast: Robert Taylor, Audrey Totter, Herbert Marshall, Dorothy Patrick, H.B. Warner.

His Kind of Woman

RKO 1951. Prod: Robert Sparks. Dir: John Farrow. Scr: Frank Fenton and Jack Leonard; from the unpublished story "Star Sapphire" by Gerald Drayson Adams. Ph: Harry J. Wild. Cast: Robert Mitchum, Jane Russell, Vincent Price, Tim Holt, Charles McGraw.

Hitch-Hiker, The

RKO 1953. Prod: Collier Young. Dir: Ida Lupino. Scr: Collier Young and Ida Lupino, from an unpublished story by Daniel Mainwaring. Ph: Nicholas Musuraca. Cast: Edmond O'Brien, Frank Lovejoy, William Talman, José Torvay, Sam Hayes.

House of Bamboo

Fox 1955. Prod: Buddy Adler. Dir: Samuel Fuller. Scr: Harry Kleiner, with additional dialogue by Samuel Fuller. Ph: Joe MacDonald. Cast: Robert Ryan, Robert Stack, Shirley Yamaguchi, Cameron Mitchell, Brad Dexter.

House on 92nd Street, The

Fox 1945. Prod: Louis de Rochemont. Dir: Henry Hathaway. Scr: Barre Lyndon, Charles G. Booth, and John Manks Jr.; from an unpublished story by Charles G. Booth. Ph: Norbert Brodine. Cast: William Eythe, Lloyd Nolan, Signe Hasso, Gene Lockhart, Leo G. Carroll.

I Love Trouble

Col 1948. Prod/Dir: Sylvan Simon. Scr: Roy Huggins. Ph: Charles Lawton Jr. Cast: Franchot Tone, Janet Blair, Janis Carter, Adele Jergens, Glenda Farrell.

Illegal

WB 1955. Prod: Frank P. Rosenberg. Dir: Lewis Allen. Scr: W. R. Burnett and James R. Webb. Ph: J. Peverell Marley. Cast: Edward G. Robinson, Nina Foch, Hugh Marlowe, Robert Ellenstein, DeForest Kelley.

Impact

UA 1949. Prod: Leo C. Popkin. Dir: Arthur Lubin. Scr: Jay Dratler. Ph: Ernest Lazlo. Cast: Brian Donlevy, Ella Raines, Charles Coburn, Helen Walker, Anna May Wong.

It Always Rains on Sunday

Ealing 1947. Prod: Michael Balcon. Dir: Robert Hamer. Scr: Henry Cornelius, from a Arthur La Bern novel. Ph: Douglas Slocombe. Cast: Googie Withers, Edward Chapman, Susan Shaw, Patricia Plunkett, David Lines.

I Wake Up Screaming

Fox 1942. Prod: Milton Sperling. Dir: H. Bruce Humberstone. Scr: Dwight Taylor; from the novel by Steve Fisher, serialised in *Photoplay-Movie Mirror*. Ph: Edward Cronjager. Cast: Betty Grable, Victor Mature, Carole Landis, Laird Cregar, William Gargan.

I Walk Alone

Par 1948. Prod: Hal B. Wallis. Dir: Byron Haskin. Scr: Charles Schnee, adapted by Robert Smith and John Bright; from the play *Beggars are Coming to Town* by Theodore Reeves. Ph: Farciot Edouart. Cast: Burt Lancaster, Elizabeth Scott, Kirk Douglas, Wendell Corey, Kristine Miller.

In a Lonely Place

Col 1950. Prod: Robert Lord. Dir: Nicholas Ray. Scr: Andrew Solt, adapted by Edmund H. North; from the novel by Dorothy B. Hughes. Ph: Burnett Guffey. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Gloria Grahame, Frank Lovejoy, Carl Benton Reid, Art Smith.

Jeopardy

MGM 1953. Prod: Sol Baer Fielding and Charles Schnee. Dir: John Sturges. Scr: Mel Dinelli. Ph: Victor Milner. Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Barry Sullivan, Ralph Meeker, Lee Aaker, Rico Alaniz.

Johnny Eager

MGM 1942. Prod: John W. Considine, Jr. Dir: Mervyn LeRoy. Scr: John Lee Mahin and James Edward Grant; from an unpublished story by James Edward Grant. Ph: Harold Rosson. Cast: Robert Taylor, Lana Turner, Edward Arnold, Van Heflin, Robert Sterling.

Johnny O'Clock

Col 1947. Prod: Edward G. Nealis. Dir: Robert Rossen. Scr: Robert Rossen; from an unpublished story by Milton Holmes. Ph: Burnett Guffey. Cast: Dick Powell, Evelyn Keyes, Lee J. Cobb, Ellen Drew, Nina Foch.

Journey into Fear

RKO 1943. Prod: George J. Schaefer and Orson Welles. Dir: Norman Foster. Scr: Joseph Cotten and Orson Welles; from the novel by Eric Amber. Ph: Karl Struss. Cast: Joseph Cotten, Dolores Del Rio, Orson Welles, Ruth Warrick, Agnes Moorehead.

Kansas City Confidential

UA 1952. Prod: Edward Small. Dir: Phil Karlson. Scr: George Bruce and Harry Essex; from an unpublished story by Harold R. Greene and Rowland Brown. Ph: George E. Diskant. Cast: John Payne, Coleen Gray, Preston Foster, Dona Drake, Jack Elam.

Key Largo

WB 1948. Prod: Jerry Wald. Dir: John Huston. Scr: Richard Brooks, John Huston, from the Maxwell Anderson play. Ph: Karl Freund. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Edward G. Robinson, Lauren Bacall, Lionel Barrymore, Claire Trevor.

Kid Glove Killer

MGM 1942. Prod: Jack Chertok. Dir: Fred Zinneman. Scr: John C. Higgins. Ph: Paul Vogel. Cast: Van Heflin, Marsha Hunt, Lee Bowman, Samuel S. Hinds, Cliff Clark.

Killer That Stalked New York, The

Col 1951. Prod: Robert Cohn. Dir: Earl McEvoy. Scr: Harry Essex; from a *Cosmopolitan* magazine article "Smallpox: The Killer That Stalked New York" by Milton Lehman. Ph: Joseph Biroc. Cast: Evelyn Keyes, Charles Korvin, William Bishop, Dorothy Malone, Lola Albright.

Killers, The

Univ 1946. Prod: Mark Hellinger. Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Anthony Veiller; from the short story by Ernest Hemingway. Ph: Woody Bredell. Cast: Edmund O'Brien, Ava Gardner, Albert Dekker, Sam Levene, John Miljan.

Killer's Kiss

UA 1955. Prod: Stanley Kubrick and Morris Bousel. Dir: Stanley Kubrick. Scr: Stanley Kubrick. Ph: Stanley Kubrick. Cast: Frank Silvera, Jamie Smith, Irene Kane, Jerry Jarret, Mike Dana.

Killing, The

UA 1956. Prod: James B. Harris. Dir: Stanley Kubrick. Scr: Stanley Kubrick and Jim Thompson, from Lionel White's novel *The Clean Break*. Ph: Lucien Ballard. Cast: Sterling Hayden, Coleen Gray, Elisha Cook, Jr, Marie Windsor, Ted Décorsia.

Kiss Me Deadly

UA 1955. Prod/Dir: Robert Aldrich. Scr: A.I. Bezzerides, from the Mickey Spillane novel. Ph: Ernest Laszlo. Cast: Ralph Meeker, Albert Dekker, Cloris Leachman, Paul Stewart, Juano Hernandez.

Kiss of Death

Fox 1947. Prod: Fred Kohlmar. Dir: Henry Hathaway. Scr: Ben Hecht, Charles Lederer, from an Eleazar Lipsky story. Ph: Norbert Brodine. Cast: Victor Mature, Brian Donlevy, Richard Widmark, Coleen Gray, Karl Malden.

Kiss the Blood off My Hands

Uni 1948. Prod: Harold Hecht. Dir: Norman Foster. Scr: Leonardo Bercovici, from the novel by Gerald Butler. Ph: Russell Metty. Cast: Joan Fontaine, Burt Lancaster, Robert Newton, Lewis L. Russell, Aminta Dyne.

Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye

WB 1950. Prod: William Cagney. Dir: Gordon Douglas. Scr: Harry Brown, from Horace McCoy's *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* novel. Ph: J. Peverell Marley. Cast: James Cagney, Barbara Payton, Helena Carter, Ward Bond, Luther Adler.

Lady from Shanghai, The

Col 1948. Prod/Dir: Orson Welles. Scr: Orson Welles, from the novel *Before I Die* by Sherwood King. Ph: Charles Lawton, Jr. Cast: Rita Hayworth, Orson Welles, Everett Sloane, Glenn Anders, Ted de Corsia.

Lady in the Lake

MGM 1947. Prod: George Haight. Dir: Robert Montgomery. Scr: Steve Fisher, from the novel by Raymond Chandler. Ph: Paul C. Vogel. Cast: Robert Montgomery, Lloyd Nolan, Audrey Totter, Tom Tully, Leon Ames.

Lady without Passport, A

MGM 1950. Prod: Samuel Marx. Dir: Joseph H. Lewis. Scr: Howard Dimsdale, adapted by Cyril Hume; from a story by Lawrence Taylor. Ph: Paul C. Vogel. Cast: Hedy Lamarr, John Hodiak, James Craig, George Macready, Steven Geray.

Larceny

Univ 1948. Prod: Leonard Goldstein. Dir: George Sherman. Scr: William Bowers, from the novel *The Velvet Fleece* by Loys Eby. Ph: Irving Glassberg. Cast: John Payne, Joan Caulfield, Dan Duryea, Shelley Winters, Dorothy Hart.

Laura

Fox 1944. Prod/Dir: Otto Preminger, Rouben Mamoulian (uncredited). Scr: Jay Dratler, Samuel Hoffenstein, Betty Reinhardt, Ring Lardner Jr. (uncredited), from the Vera Caspary novel. Ph: Joseph LaShelle, Lucien Ballard (uncredited). Cast: Gene Tierney, Dana Andrews, Clifton Webb, Vincent Price, Judith Anderson.

Leave Her to Heaven

Fox 1945. Prod: William A. Bacher. Dir: John M. Stahl. Scr: Jo Swerling; from the novel by Ben Ames Williams. Ph: Leon Shamroy. Cast: Gene Tierney, Cornel Wilde, Jeanne Crain, Vincent Price, Mary Phillips.

Lineup, The

Col 1958. Prod: Jaime Del Valle. Dir: Don Siegel. Scr: Stirling Silliphant; from characters created by Lawrence L. Klee in the CBS Television series "The Lineup". Ph: Hal Mohr. Cast: Eli Wallach, Robert Keith, Warner Anderson, Richard Jaeckel, Mary La Roche.

Loophole

AA 1954. Prod: Lindsley Parsons. Dir: Harold Schuster. Scr: Warren Douglas; from an unpublished story by George Bricker and Dwight V. Babcock. Ph: William Sickner. Cast: Barry Sullivan, Charles McGraw, Dorothy Malone, Don Haggerty, Mary Beth Hughes.

Macao

RKO 1952. Prod: Alex Gottlieb. Dir: Josef von Sternberg [Uncredited: Nicholas Ray]. Scr: Bernard C. Schoenfeld and Stanley Rubin; from an unpublished story by Bob Williams. Ph: Harry J. Wild. Cast: Robert Mitchum, Jane Russell, William Bendix, Thomas Gomez, Gloria Grahame.

Madigan

Univ 1968. Prod: Frank P. Rosenberg. Dir: Don Siegel. Scr: Henri Simoun and Abraham Polonsky; from the novel *The Commissioner* by Richard Dougherty. Ph: Russell Metty. Cast: Richard Widmark, Henry Fonda, Inger Stevens, Harry Guardino, James Whitmore.

Maltese Falcon, The

WB 1941. Prod: Hal B. Wallis. Dir: John Huston. Scr: John Huston, from the novel by Dashiell Hammett. Ph: Arthur Edeson. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Mary Astor, Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet, Elisha Cook, Jr.

Man Between, The

Par 1953. Prod: Carol Reed and Hugh Perceval. Dir: Carol Reed. Scr: Harry Kurnitz. Ph: Desmond Dickinson. Cast: James Mason, Claire Bloom, Hildegard Knef, Geoffrey Toone, Aribert Waesher.

Man Who Cheated Himself, The

Fox 1951. Prod: Jack M. Warner. Dir: Felix E. Feist. Scr: Seton I. Miller and Phillip MacDonald; from an unpublished story by Seton I. Miller. Ph: Russell Harlan. Cast: Lee J. Cobb, John Dall, Jane Wyatt, Lisa Howard, Alan Wells.

Mildred Pierce

WB 1945. Prod: Jerry Wald. Dir: Michael Curtiz. Scr: Ranald MacDougall; from the novel by James M. Cain. Ph: Ernest Haller. Cast: Joan Crawford, Jack Carson, Zachary Scott, Eve Arden, Ann Blyth.

Ministry of Fear

Par 1945. Prod: B. G. DeSylva. Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Seton I. Miller; from the novel by Graham Greene. Ph: Henry Sharp. Cast: Ray Milland, Marjorie Reynolds, Carl Esmond, Hillary Brooke, Percy Waram.

Mystery Street

MGM 1950. Prod: Frank E. Taylor. Dir: John Sturges. Scr: Sydney Boehm and Richard Brooks; from an unpublished story by Leonard Spigelgass. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Ricardo Montalban, Sally Forrest, Bruce Bennett, Elsa Lanchester, Marshall Thompson.

Mob, The

Col 1951. Prod: Jerry Bresler. Dir: Robert Parrish. Scr: William Bowers; from the novel *Waterfront* by Ferguson Findley. Ph: Joseph Walker. Cast: Broderick Crawford, Betty Buehler, Richard Kiley, Otto Hulett, Matt Crowley.

Moonrise

Rep 1949. Prod: Charles Hass. Dir: Frank Borzage. Scr: Charles Haas; from the novel by Theodore Strauss. Ph: John L. Russell. Cast: Dane Clark, Gail Russell, Ethel Barrymore, Allyn Joslyn, Rex Ingram.

Murder, My Sweet

RKO 1944. Prod: Sid Rogell. Dir: Edward Dmytryk. Scr: John Paxton, from the novel *Farewell, My Lovely* by Raymond Chandler. Cast: Dick Powell, Claire Trevor, Anne Shirley, Otto Kruger, Mike Mazurki.

My Name Is Julia Ross

Col 1945. Prod: Wallace MacDonald. Dir: Joseph H. Lewis. Scr: Muriel Roy Bolton; from the novel *The Woman in Red* by Anthony Gilbert. Cast: Nina Foch, Dame May Whitty, George Macready, Roland Varno, Anita Bolster.

99 River Street

UA 1953. Prod: Edward Small. Dir: Phil Karlson. Scr: Robert Smith; from an unpublished story by George Zuckerman. Ph: Franz Planer. Cast: John Payne, Evelyn Keyes, Brad Dexter, Frank Faylen, Peggie Castle.

Naked City, The

Univ 1948. Prod: Mark Hellinger. Dir: Jules Dassin. Scr: Albert Maltz and Malvin Wald; from an unpublished story by Malvin Wald. Ph: William Daniels. Cast: Barry Fitzgerald, Howard Duff, Dorothy Hart, Don Taylor, Ted de Corsia.

Narrow Margin, The

RKO 1952. Prod: Stanley Rubin. Dir: Richard Fleischer. Scr: Earl Fenton; from the unpublished story by Martin Goldsmith and Jack Leonard. Ph: George E. Diskant. Cast: Charles McGraw, Marie Windsor, Jacqueline White, Gordon Gebert, Queenie Leonard.

Niagara

Fox 1953. Prod: Charles Brackett. Dir: Henry Hathaway. Scr: Charles Brackett, Walter Reisch, and Richard Breen. Ph: Joe MacDonald. Cast: Marilyn Monroe, Joseph Cotten, Jean Peters, Casey Adams, Dennis O'Dea.

Night and the City

Fox 1950. Prod: Samuel J. Engel. Dir: Jules Dassin. Scr: Jo Eisinger; from the novel by Gerald Kersh. Ph: Max Greene. Cast: Richard Widmark, Gene Tierney, Googie Withers, Hugh Marlowe, Francis L. Sullivan.

Night Has a Thousand Eyes

Par 1948. Prod: Endre Bohem. Dir: John Farrow. Scr: Barre Lyndon and Jonathan Latimer; from the novel by Cornell Woolrich. Ph: John F. Seitz. Cast: Edward G. Robinson, Gail Russell, John Lund, Virginia Bruce, William Demarest.

Night Holds Terror, The

Col 1955. Prod/Dir/Scr: Andrew L. Stone. Ph: Fred Jackman, Jr. Cast: Jack Kelly, Hildy Parks, Vince Edwards, John Cassavetes, David Cross.

Night of the Hunter, The

MGM 1955. Prod: Paul Gregory. Dir: Charles Laughton. Scr: James Agee; from the novel by Davis Grubb. Ph: Stanley Cortez. Cast: Robert Mitchum, Shelley Winters, Lillian Gish, James Gleason, Evelyn Varden.

Nightmare Alley

Fox 1947. Prod: George Jessel. Dir: Edmund Goulding. Scr: Jules Furthman; from the novel by William Lindsay Gresham. Ph: Lee Garmes. Cast: Tyrone Power, Joan Blondell, Colleen Gray, Helen Walker, Taylor Holmes.

Nobody Lives Forever

WB 1946. Prod: Robert Buckner. Dir: Jean Negulesco. Scr: W.R. Burnett. Ph: Arthur Edeson. Cast: John Garfield, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Walter Brennan, Faye Emerson, George Coulouris.

Notorious

RKO 1946. Prod/Dir: Alfred Hitchcock. Scr: Ben Hecht, from a Hitchcock treatment. Ph: Ted Tetzlaff. Cast: Ingrid Bergman, Cary Grant, Claude Rains, Louis Calhern, Leopoldine Konstantin.

Odds against Tomorrow

UA 1959. Prod/Dir: Robert Wise. Scr: John O. Killens and Nelson Gidding; from the novel by William P. McGivern. Ph: Joseph Brun. Cast: Harry Belafonte, Robert Ryan, Gloria Grahame, Shelley Winters, Ed Begley.

One Way Street

Univ 1950. Prod: Leonard Goldstein. Dir: Hugo Fregonese. Scr: Lawrence Kimble. Ph: Maury Gerstman. Cast: James Mason, Marta Torén, Dan Dureya, Basil Ruysdael, William Conrad.

Out of the Past

RKO 1947. Prod: Warren Duff, Robert Sparks. Dir: Jacques Tourneur. Scr: Geoffrey Homes, from his novel *Build My Gallows High*. Ph: Nicholas Musuraca. Cast: Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer, Kirk Douglas, Rhonda Fleming, Steve Brodie.

Panic in the Streets

Fox 1950. Prod: Sol C. Siegel. Dir: Elia Kazan. Scr: Richard Murphy, adapted by Daniel Fuchs; from an unpublished story by Edna and Edward Anhalt. Ph: Joe MacDonald. Cast: Richard Widmark, Paul Douglas, Barbara Bel Geddes, Walter [Jack] Palance, Zero Mostel.

People against O'Hara, The

MGM 1951. Prod: William H. Wright. Dir: John Sturges. Scr: John Monks, Jr.; from the novel by Eleazar Lipsky. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Spencer Tracy, Pat O'Brien, Diana Lynn, John Hodiak, Eduardo Cianeli.

Phantom Lady

Univ 1944. Prod: Milton Feld and Joan Harrison. Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Bernard C. Schoenfeld; from the novel by William Irish (Cornell Woolrich). Ph: Woody Bredell. Cast: Franchot Tone, Ella Raines, Alan Curtis, Elisha Cook, Jr., Thomas Gomez.

Pickup on South Street

Fox 1953. Prod: Jules Schermer. Dir: Samuel Fuller. Scr: Samuel Fuller; from an unpublished story by Dwight Taylor. Ph: Joe Macdonald. Cast: Richard Widmark, Jean Peters, Thelma Ritter, Murvyn Vye, Richard Kiley.

Pitfall

UA 1948. Prod: Samuel Bischoff. Dir: André de Toth. Scr: Karl Kamb; from the novel by Jay Dratler. Ph: Harry Wild. Cast: Dick Powell, Lizabeth Scott, Jane Wyatt, Raymond Burr, John Litel.

Port of New York

Aubrey Schenck Productions 1949. Prod: Aubrey Schenck. Dir: Laszlo Benedek. Scr: Eugene Ling. Ph: George E. Diskant. Cast: Scott Brady, Richard Rober, K.T. Stevens, Yul Brynner, Arthur Blake.

Possessed

WB 1947. Prod: Jerry Wald. Dir: Curtis Bernhardt. Scr: Sylvia Richards and Ranald MacDougall; from the *Cosmopolitan* magazine novelette *One Man's Secret* by Rita Weiman. Ph: Joseph Valentine. Cast: Joan Crawford, Van Heflin, Raymond Massey, Geraldine Brooks, Stanley Ridges.

Postman Always Rings Twice, The

MGM 1946. Prod: Carey Wilson. Dir: Tay Garnett. Scr: Harry Ruskin and Niven Busch; from the novel by James M. Cain. Ph: Sidney Wagner. Cast: Lana Turner, John Garfield, Cecil Kellaway, Hume Cronyn, Leon Ames.

Prowler, The

UA 1951. Prod: S.P. Eagle. Dir: Joseph Losey. Scr: Hugo Butler; from an unpublished story by Robert Thoeren and Hans Wilhelm. Ph: Arthur Miller. Cast: Van Heflin, Evelyn Keyes, John Maxwell, Katharine Warren, Emerson Tracy.

Pushover

Col 1954. Prod: Jules Schermer. Dir: Richard Quine. Scr: Roy Huggins; from the novel *Rafferty* by William S. Ballinger. Ph: Lester H. White. Cast: Fred MacMurray, Kim Novak, Phil Carey, Dorothy Malone, E.G. Marshall.

Quicksand

UA 1950. Prod: Mickey Rooney and Peter Lorre. Dir: Irving Pichel. Scr: Robert Smith. Ph: Lionel Lindon. Cast: Mickey Rooney, Jeanne Cagney, Barbara Bates, Peter Lorre, Taylor Holmes.

Racket, The

RKO 1951. Prod: Edmund Grainger. Dir: John Cromwell. Scr: William Wister Haines and W.R. Burnett; based on the play by Bartlett Cormack. Ph: Tony Gaudio. Cast: Robert Mitchum, Lizabeth Scott, Robert Ryan, William Talman, Ray Collins.

Railroaded

PRC 1947. Prod: Charles F. Riesner. Dir: Anthony Mann. Scr: John C. Higgins; from a story by Gertrude Walker. Ph: Guy Roe. Cast: John Ireland, Sheila Ryan, Hugh Beaumont, Jane Randolph, Ed Kelly.

Raw Deal

EL 1948. Prod: Edward Small (Edward Small Production). Dir: Anthony Mann. Scr: Leopold Atlas and John C. Higgins, from a story by Arnold B. Armstrong and Audrey Ashley. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Dennis O'Keefe, Claire Trevor, Marsha Hunt, John Ireland, Raymond Burr.

Red House

Sol 1947. Prod: Sol Lesser. Dir: Delmer Daves. Scr: Delmer Daves and Albert Laltz; from a George Agnew Chamberlain novel. Ph: Bert Glennon. Cast: Edward G. Robinson, Lon McCallister, Judith Anderson, Rory Calhoun, Allene Roberts.

Reign of Terror

EL 1949. Prod: William Cameron Menzies and Edward Lasker. Dir: Anthony Mann. Scr: Aenas MacKenzie and Philip Yordan. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Robert Cummings, Richard Basehart, Richard Hart, Arlene Dahl, Arnold Moss.

Repeat Performance

EL 1947. Prod: Aubrey Schenck. Dir: Alfred Werker. Scr: Paul Jarrico. Ph: L. William O'Connell. Cast: Louis Hayward, Joan Leslie, Virginia Field, Tom Conway, Richard Basehart.

Roadblock

RKO 1951. Prod: Lewis J. Rachmil. Dir: Harold Daniels. Scr: Steve Fisher and George Bricker; from a story by Richard Landau and Geoffrey Homes. Ph: Nicholas Musuraca. Cast: Charles McGraw, Joan Dixon, Lowell Gilmore, Louis Jean Heydt, Milburn Stone.

Road House

Fox 1948. Prod: Edward Chodorov. Dir: Jean Negulesco. Scr: Edward Chodorov; from an unpublished story by Margaret Gruen and Oscar Saul. Ph: Joseph LaShelle. Cast: Ida Lupino, Cornel Wilde, Richard Widmark, Celeste Holm, O.Z. Whitehead.

Scarlet Street

Univ 1945. Prod/Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Dudley Nichols, from the novel and play *La Chienne* by Georges de la Fouchardière. Ph: Milton Krasner. Cast: Edward G. Robinson, Joan Bennett, Dan Duryea, Jess Barker, Margaret Lindsay.

Second Woman, The

UA 1951. Prod: Mort Briskin and Robert Smith. Dir: James V. Kern. Scr: Robert Smith and Mort Briskin. Ph: Hal Mohr. Cast: Robert Young, Betsy Drake, John Sutton, Florence Bates, Morris Carnovsky.

Set-Up, The

RKO 1949. Prod: Richard Goldstone. Dir: Robert Wise. Scr: Art Chon; from the poem by Joseph Moncure March. Ph: Milton Krasner. Cast: Robert Ryan, Audrey Totter, George Tobias, Alan Baxter, Wallace Ford.

Shadow of a Doubt

Univ 1943. Prod: Jack H. Skirball. Dir: Alfred Hitchcock. Scr: Thornton Wilder, Alma Reville, Salley Benson, from a Gordon McDonnell story. Ph: Joseph Valentine. Cast: Joseph Cotten, Teresa Wright, MacDonald Carey, Patricia Collinge, Henry Travers.

Shanghai Gesture, The

UA 1941. Prod: Arnold Pressburger. Dir: Joseph von Sternberg. Scr: Joseph von Sternberg, Karl Vollmoeller, Geza Herczeg, Jules Furthman, from the play by John Colton. Ph: Paul Ivano. Cast: Gene Tierney, Walter Huston, Victor Mature, Ona Munson, Phyllis Brooks.

Shockproof

Col 1949. Prod: Helen Deutsch and S. Sylvan Simon. Dir: Douglas Sirk. Scr: Helen Deutsch and Samuel Fuller. Ph: Charles Lawton Jr. Cast: Cornel Wilde, Patricia Knight, John Baragrey, Esther Minciotti, Howard St. John.

Side Street

MGM 1950. Prod: Sam Zimbalist. Dir: Anthony Mann. Scr: Sydney Boehm. Ph: Joseph Ruttenberg. Cast: Farley Granger, Cathy O'Donnell, James Craig, Paul Kelly, Edmond Ryan.

Sleeping City, The

UI 1950. Prod: Leonard Goldstein. Dir: George Sherman. Scr: Jo Eisinger. Ph: William Miller. Cast: Richard Conte, Coleen Gray, Peggy Dow, John Alexander, Alex Nicol.

Slightly Scarlet

RKO 1956. Prod: Benedict Bogeaus. Dir: Allan Dwan. Scr: Robert Brees; from the novel *Love's Lovely Counterfeit* by James M. Cain. Ph: John Alton. Cast: John Payne, Arlene Dahl, Rhonda Fleming, Kent Taylor, Ted de Corsia.

Somewhere in the Night

Fox 1946. Prod: Anderson Lawler. Dir: Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Scr: Howard Dimsdale and Joseph L. Mankiewicz, adapted by Lee Strasberg; from a story by Marvin Borowsky. Ph: Norbert Brodine. Cast: John Hodiak, Nancy Guild, Lloyd Nolan, Richard Conte, Josephine Hutchinson.

Sorry, Wrong Number

Par 1948. Prod: Hal B. Wallis and Anatole Litvak. Dir: Anatole Litvak. Scr: Lucille Fletcher, from her radio play. Ph: Sol Polito. Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Burt Lancaster, Ann Richards, Wendell Corey, Harold Vermilyea.

Spiral Staircase, The

RKO 1946. Prod: Dore Schary. Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Mel Dinnelli, from the Ethel Lina White novel *Some Must Watch*. Ph: Nicholas Musuraca. Cast: Dorothy McGuire, George Brent, Ethel Barrymore, Rhonda Fleming, Kent Smith.

Spiritualist, The

Eagle Lion 1948. Prod: Benjamin Stoloff. Dir: Bernard Vorhaus. Scr: Muriel Roy Bolton and Ian McLellan Hunter, from an original story by Crane Wilbur. Ph: John Alton. Cast: Turhan Bey, Lynn Bari, Cathy O'Donnell, Richard Carlson, Donald Curtis.

Story of Molly X, The

Univ 1949. Prod: Aaron Rosenberg. Dir: Crane Wilbur. Scr: Crane Wilbur. Ph: Irving Glassberg. Cast: June Havoc, John Russell, Dorothy Hart, Elliot Lewis, Charles McGraw.

Strange Illusion

PRC 1945. Prod: Leon Fromkess. Dir: Edgar G. Ulmer. Scr: Adele Commandini; from an original story by Fritz Rotter. Ph: Philip Tannura. Cast: James Lydon, Warren William, Sally Eilers, Regis Toomey, Charles Arnt.

Strange Love of Martha Ivers, The

Par 1946. Prod: Hal B. Wallis. Dir: Lewis Milestone. Scr: Robert Rossen, from an unpublished story, *Love Lies Bleeding*, by Jack Patrick. Ph: Victor Milner. Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Van Heflin, Elizabeth Scott, Kirk Douglas, Judith Anderson.

Stranger, The

RKO 1946. Prod: S.P. Eagle. Dir: Orson Welles. Scr: Anthony Veiller [with uncredited contribution from John Huston and Orson Welles]; from a story by Victor Trivas. Ph: Russell Metty. Cast: Edward G. Robinson, Loretta Young, Orson Welles, Philip Merivale, Billy House.

Stranger on the Third Floor

RKO 1940. Prod: Lee Marcus. Dir: Boris Ingster. Scr: Frank Partos. Ph: Nicholas Musuraca. Cast: Peter Lorre, John McGuire, Margaret Tallichet, Charles Waldron, Elisha Cook, Jr.

Strangers on a Train

WB 1951. Prod/Dir: Alfred Hitchcock. Scr: Raymond Chandler and Czenzi Ormonde, adapted by Whitfield Cook; from the novel by Patricia Highsmith. Ph: Robert Burks. Cast: Farley Granger, Ruth Roman, Robert Walker, Patricia Hitchcock, Leo G. Carroll.

Street with No Name, The

Fox 1948. Prod: Samuel G. Engel. Dir: William Keighley. Scr: Harry Kleiner. Ph: Joe MacDonald. Cast: Mark Stevens, Richard Widmark, Lloyd Nolan, Barbara Lawrence, Ed Begley.

Sudden Fear

RKO 1952. Prod: Joseph Kaufman. Dir: David Miller. Scr: Lenore Coffee and Robert Smith; from the novel by Edna Sherry. Ph: Charles Lang, Jr. Cast: Joan Crawford, Jack Palance, Gloria Grahame, Bruce Bennett, Virginia Huston.

Sunset Boulevard

Par 1950. Prod: Charles Brackett. Dir: Billy Wilder. Scr: Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, D.M. Marshman. Ph: John F. Seitz. Cast: Gloria Swanson, William Holden, Nancy Olson, Erich von Stroheim, Fred Clark.

Suspect, The

Univ 1944. Prod: Islin Auster. Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Arthur T. Horman and Bertram Millhauser. Ph: Paul Ivano. Cast: Charles Laughton, Ella Raines, Molly Lamont, Stanley Ridges, Henry Daniell.

Sweet Smell of Success

UA 1957. Prod: James Hill. Dir: Alexander MacKendrick. Scr: Clifford Odets, adapted by Ernest Lehman; from the short story "Tell Me About it Tomorrow" by Ernest Lehman. Ph: James Wong Howe. Cast: Burt Lancaster, Tony Curtis, Susan Harrison, Martin Milner, Sam Levene.

Tension

MGM 1950. Prod: Robert Sisk. Dir: John Berry. Scr: Allen Rivkin; from an unpublished story by John Klorer. Ph: Harry Stradling. Cast: Richard Basehart, Audrey Totter, Cyd Charisse, Barry Sullivan, Lloyd Gough.

They Live by Night

RKO 1948. Prod: John Houseman. Dir: Nicholas Ray. Scr: Charles Schnee, adapted by Nicholas Ray; from the novel *Thieves Like US* by Edward Anderson. Ph: George E. Diskant. Cast: Cathy O'Donnell, Farley Granger, Howard Da Silva, Jay C. Flippen, Helen Craig.

They Won't Believe Me

RKO 1947. Prod: Jack J. Gross and Joan Harrison. Dir: Irving Pichel. Scr: Jonathan Latimer; from a story by Gordon McDonell. Ph: Harry J. Wild. Cast: Susan Hayward, Robert Young, Jane Greer, Rita Johnson, Tom Powers.

Thieves' Highway

Fox 1949. Prod: Robert Bassler. Dir: Jules Dassin. Scr: A.I. Bezzerides; from his novel *Thieves' Market*. Ph: Norbert Brodine. Cast: Richard Conte, Valentina Cortesa, Lee J. Cobb, Barbara Lawrence, Jack Oakie.

This Gun for Hire

Par 1942. Prod: Richard Blumenthal. Dir: Frank Tuttle. Scr: Albert Maltz, W.R. Burnett, from the Graham Greene novel *A Gun for Sale*. Ph: John F. Seitz. Cast: Alan Ladd, Veronica Lake, Tully Marshall, Laird Cregar, Robert Preston.

Threat, The

RKO 1949. Prod: Hugh King. Dir: Felix Feist. Scr: Steve Fisher. Ph: Paul Sawtell. Cast: Michael O'Shea, Virginia Grey, Charles MacGraw, Julie Bishop, Frank Conroy.

Tomorrow Is Another Day

WB 1951. Prod: Henry Blanke. Dir: Felix E. Feist. Scr: Guy Endore. Ph: Robert Burks. Cast: Ruth Roman, Steve Cochran, Lurene Tuttle, Ray Teal, Morris Ankrum.

Too Late for Tears

UA 1949. Prod: Hunt Stromberg. Dir: Byron Haskin. Scr: Roy Huggins; from the *Saturday Evening Post* serialization of his novel. Ph: William Mellor. Cast: Elizabeth Scott, Don DeFore, Dan Dureya, Arthur Kennedy, Kristine Miller.

Touch of Evil

Universal- International 1958. Prod: Albert Zugsmith. Dir: Orson Welles. Scr: Orson Welles, from the Whit Masterson novel *Badge of Evil*. Ph: Russel Metty. Cast: Orson Welles, Charlton Heston, Janet Leigh, Joseph Calleia, Akim Tamiroff.

Trapped

Eagle Lion 1949. Prod: Bryan Foy. Dir: Richard Fleischer. Scr: Earl Felton and George Zuckerman. Ph: Guy Roe. Cast: Lloyd Bridges, Barbara Payton, John Hoyt, James Todd, Russ Conway.

Union Station

Par 1950. Prod: Jules Schermer. Dir: Rudolph Maté. Scr: Sydney Boehm; from an unpublished story by Thomas Walsh. Ph: Daniel L. Fapp. Cast: William Holden, Nancy Olson, Barry Fitzgerald, Lyle Bettger, Jan Sterling.

Unsuspected, The

WB 1947. Prod: Charles Hoffman. Dir: Michael Curtiz. Scr: Ranald MacDougall, adaptation by Bess Meredyth; from the novel by Charlotte Armstrong. Ph: Woody Bredell. Cast: Joan Caulfield, Claude Rains, Audrey Totter, Constance Bennett, Hurd Hatfield.

Vicki

Fox 1953. Prod: Leonard Goldstein. Dir: Harry Horner. Scr: Dwight Taylor, with additional dialogue by Harold Greene and Leo Townsend, from the novel *I Wake Up Screaming* by Steve Fisher. Ph: Milton Krasner. Cast: Jeanne Crain, Jean Peters, Elliott Reid, Richard Boone, Casey Adams.

Where Danger Lives

RKO 1950. Prod: Irving Cummings Jr. Dir: John Farrow. Scr: Charles Bennett; from an unpublished by Leo Rosten. Ph: Nicholas Musuraca. Cast: Robert Mitchum, Faith Domergue, Claude Rains, Maureen O'Sullivan, Charles Kemper.

Where the Sidewalk Ends

Fox 1950. Prod/Dir: Otto Preminger. Scr: Ben Hecht, Victor Trivas, Frank P. Rosenberg, Robert E. Kent, from the William L. Stuart novel *Night Cry*. Ph: Joseph LaSelle. Cast: Dana Andrews, Gene Tierney, Gary Merrill, Tom Tully, Bert Freed.

Whirlpool

Fox 1949. Prod/Dir: Otto Preminger. Scr: Ben Hecht, Andrew Solt, from a Guy Endore novel. Ph: Arthur Miller. Cast: Gene Tierney, Richard Conte, José Ferrer, Charles Bickford, Barbara O'Neil.

White Heat

WB 1949. Prod: Lou Edelman. Dir: Raoul Walsh. Scr: Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts; suggested by a story by Virginia Kellogg. Ph: Sid Hickox. Cast: James Cagney, Virginia Mayo, Edmond O'Brien, Margaret Wycherly, Steve Cochran.

Wicked Woman

UA 1953. Prod: Clarence Greene. Dir: Russell Rouse. Scr: Clarence Green. Ph: Eddie Fitzgerald. Cast: Beverly Michaels, Richard Egan, Percy Helton, Evelyn Scott, Robert Osterloh.

Woman in Hiding

Univ 1950. Prod: Michael Kraike. Dir: Michael Gordon. Scr: Oscar Saul. Ph: William H. Daniels. Cast: Ida Lupino, Stephen McNally, Howard Duff, Peggy Dow, John Litel.

Woman in the Window, The

RKO 1945. Prod Nunnally Johnson. Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Nunnally Johnson; from the novel *Once off Guard* by J.H. Wallis. Ph: Milton Krasner. Cast: Edward G. Robinson, Joan Bennett, Raymond Massey, Edmond Breon, Dan Dureya.

Woman on the Beach, The

WB 1947. Prod: Jack J. Gross. Dir: Jean Renoir. Scr: Frank Davis and Jean Renoir. Ph: Leo Tover. Cast : Joan Bennett, Robert Ryan, Charles Bickford, Nan Leslie, Walter Sande.

Woman on the Run

UI 1950. Prod: Howard Welsch. Dir: Norman Foster. Scr: Alan Campbell and Norman Foster; from an *American* magazine story by Sylvia Tate. Ph: Loyal Griggs and Robert Hansard. Cast: Ann Sheridan, Dennis O'Keefe, Robert Keith, Frank Jenks, Ross Elliott.

Wrong Man, The

WB 1956. Prod/Dir: Alfred Hitchcock. Scr: Maxwell Anderson and Angus MacPhail; from "The True Story of Christopher Emmanuel Balestrero" by Maxwell Anderson. Ph: Robert Burks. Cast: Henry Fonda, Vera Miles, Anthony Quayle, Harold J. Stone, Esther Minciotti.

711 Ocean Drive

Col 1950. Prod: Frank N. Seltzer. Dir: Joseph M. Newman. Scr: Richard English and Francis Swann. Ph: Franz Planer. Cast: Edmond O'Brien, Joanne Dru, Otto Kruger, Barry Kelley, Dorothy Patrick.

Total: 208 films

B) Other Relevant Filmography

The following list of films provides the pertinent works that I have viewed and consulted, and which proved to be significant for this project as they represent major influences on *film noir*. They are from various countries (essentially France, Germany and the UK) and they range from the German Expressionism era to gangster films and the French Poetic Realism period. Again, regarding the cast, I have included the names of the five main protagonists of each film.

39 Steps, The

Gaumont-British 1935. Prod: Michael Balcon. Dir: Alfred Hitchcock. Scr: Charles Bennett and Alma Reville; from John Bucan's novel *The 39 Steps*. Ph: Bernard Knowles. Cast: Robert Donat, Madeleine Carroll, Lucie Mannheim, Godfrey Tearle, Peggy Ashcroft. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

Angels with Dirty Faces

WB 1938. Prod: Samuel Bischoff. Dir: Michael Curtiz. Scr: John Wexley. Ph: Sol Polito. Cast: James Cagney, Pat O'Brien, Humphrey Bogart, Ann Sheridan, George Bancroft. (Country of origin: USA)

Blanche Fury

EL 1948. Prod: Anthony Havelock-Allan. Dir: Marc Allégret. Scr: Audrey Erskine-Lindop and Cecil McGivern, from the Joseph Shearing novel. Ph: Guy Green. Cast: Valerie Hobson, Stewart Granger, Michael Gough, Walter Fitzgerald, Susanne Gibbs. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

Brothers, The

Gainsborough 1947. Prod: Sidney Box. Dir: David MacDonald. Scr: Muriel Box and Sidney Box, from a L. A. G. Strong novel. Ph: Stephen Dade. Cast: Patricia Roc, Will Fyffe, Maxwell Reed, Finlay Currie, Duncan Macrae. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, The

The Phillips Film Co., Ltd 1920. Prod: Rudolf Meinert and Erich Pommer. Dir: Robert Wiene. Scr: Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer. Ph: Willy Hameister. Cast: Conrad Veidt, Werner Kraus, Lil Dagover, Friedrich Feher, Rudolf Lettinger. (Country of origin: Germany)

Clouded Yellow, The

Carillon 1951. Prod: Betty E. Box. Dir: Ralph Thomas. Scr: Eric Ambler, from a Janet Green novel. Ph: Geoffrey Unsworth. Cast: Jean Simmons, Trevor Howard, Sonia Dresdel, Barry Jones, Kenneth More. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

Crashout

Par 1955. Prod/Scr: Hal E. Chester and Irving H. Levin. Dir: Lewis R. Foster. Ph: Russell Metty. Cast: William Bendix, Arthur Kennedy, Luther Adler, William Talman, Gene Evans. (Country of origin: USA)

Don't Bother to Knock

Fox 1952. Prod: Julian Blaustein. Dir: Roy Ward Baker. Scr: Daniel Taradash. Ph: Lucien Ballard. Cast: Marilyn Monroe, Richard Widmark, Anne Bancroft, Donna Corcoran, Jeanne Cagney. (Country of origin: USA)

Fall of the House of Usher, The

1928. Prod: James Sibley Watson. Scr: from an Edgar Allan Poe story. Dir /Ph: Melville Webber and James Sibley Watson. Cast: Herbert Stern, Hildegard Watson, Friedrich Haak, Dorthea House, Melville Webber. (Country of origin: USA)

Footsteps in the Fog

Col 1955. Prod: M. J. Frankovich. Dir: Arthur Lubin. Scr: Dorothy Davenport and Lenore J. Coffee. Ph: Christopher Challis. Cast: Stewart Granger, Jean Simmons, Bill Travers, Belinda Lee, Ronald Squire. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

Gaslight

MGM 1944. Prod: Arthur Hornblow, Jr. Dir: George Cukor. Scr: John L. Balderston and Walter Reisch; from Patrick Hamilton's play performed as *Angel Street* in 1941. Ph: Joseph Ruttenberg. Cast: Charles Boyer, Ingrid Bergman, Joseph Cotten, Dame May Whitty, Angela Lansbury. (Country of origin: USA)

Hell Is a City

Hammer 1959. Prod: Michael Carreras. Dir: Val Guest. Scr: Val Guest, from a Maurice Procter novel. Ph: Arthur Grant. Cast: Stanley Baker, John Crawford, Donald Pleasence, Maxine Audley, Billie Whitelaw. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

Hunted, The

AA 1948. Prod: Glenn Cook and Scott R. Dunlap. Dir: Jack Bernhard. Scr: Steve Fischer. Ph: Harry Neumann. Cast: Preston Foster, Belita, Pierre Watkin, Edna Holland, Charles McGraw.

I Met a Murderer

Gamma 1939. Prod / Dir / Scr: Roy Kellino. Ph: Roy Kellino. Cast: Jason Mason, Pamela Mason, Sylvia Coleridge, William Devlin, Peter Coke. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

Lady Gambles, The

Univ 1949. Prod: Michel Kraike. Dir: Michael Gordon. Scr: Roy Huggins; from a Lewis Meltzer's story. Ph: Russell Metty. Cast: Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Preston, Stephen McNally, Edith Barrett, John Hoyt. (Country of origin: USA)

Last Laugh, The

ScreenSound 1924. Prod: Erich Pommer. Dir: F. W. Murnau. Scr: Carl Mayer; based on a play by Charles W. Goddard. Ph: Karl Freund. Cast: Emil Jannings, Maly Delschaft, Max Hiller, Emilie Kurz, Hans Unterkircher. (Country of origin: Germany)

Little Caesar

WB 1930. Prod: Hal B. Wallis and Darryl F. Zanuck. Dir: Mervin LeRoy. Scr: Francis Edward Faragoh; from a W.R. Burnett novel. Ph: Tony Gaudio. Cast: Edward G. Robinson, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Glenda Farrell, William Collier Jr, Sidney Blackmer. (Country of origin: USA)

Metropolis

UFA 1927. Prod: Erich Pommer. Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Thea Von Harbou. Ph: Karl Freund. Cast: Alfred Abel, Brigitte Helm, Gustav Frohlich, Walter Ruttmann, Heinrich George. (Country of origin: Germany)

Pépé le Moko

Janus Films 1936. Prod: Robert Hakim and Raymond Hakim. Dir: Julien Duvivier. Scr: Henry La Barthe (as Detective Ashelbé) and Julien Duvivier; from a Ashelbé novel. Ph: Marc Fossard and Jules Kruger. Cast: Jean Gabin, Mireille Balin, Gabriel Gabrio, Lucas Gridoux, Gilbert-Gil. (Country of origin : France)

Public Enemy, The

WB 1931. Prod: Darryl F. Zanuck. Dir: William A. Wellman. Scr: Harvey Thew; from a Kubec Glasmon and John Bright story. Ph: Devereaux Jennings. Cast: James Cagney, Jean Harlow, Edward Woods, Joan Blondell, Mae Clarke. (Country of origin: USA)

Quai des Brumes, Le

Janus Films 1938. Prod : Grégor Rabinovitch. Dir : Marcel Carné. Scr: Jacques Prévert; from a Pierre Mac Orlan novel. Ph: Eugen Schüfftan. Cast : Jean Gabin, Michel Simon, Michèle Morgan, Pierre Brasseur, Édouard Delmont. (Country of origin : France)

Quai Des Orfèvres

Majestic Films 1947. Prod : Roger De Venloo. Dir: Henri-Georges Clouzot. Scr: Henri-Georges Clouzot and Jean Ferry; from the book “Légitime Défense” by Stanilas-André Steeman. Ph: Armand Thirard. Cast: Suzy Delair, Bernard Blier, Louis Jouvet, Simone Renant, Jean Daurand. (Country of origin: France)

Scarface

Univ 1932. Prod: Howard Hughes. Dir: Howard Hawks. Scr: Ben Hecht. Ph: Lee Garmes. Cast: Paul Muni, Ann Dvorak, George Raft, Boris Karloff, Karen Morley. (Country of origin: USA)

Secret beyond the Door

Univ 1948. Prod: Fritz Lang and Walter Wanger. Dir: Fritz Lang. Scr: Silvia Richards and Rufus King. Ph: Stanley Cortez. Cast: Joan Bennett, Michael Redgrave, Anne Revere, Barbara O'Neil, Natalie Schafer. (Country of origin: USA)

Seventh Veil, The

Ortus 1945. Prod: Sydney Box. Dir: Compton Bennett. Scr: Muriel Box and Sydney Box. Ph: Reginald H. Wyer. Cast: James Mason, Ann Todd, Herbert Lom, Hugh McDermott, Albert Lieven. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

So Evil My Love

Par 1948. Prod: Hal B. Wallis. Dir: Lewis Allen. Scr: Leonard Spigelgass, from a Joseph Shearing novel. Ph: Max Green. Cast: Ray Milland, Ann Todd, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Leo G. Carroll, Raymond Huntley. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

So Long at the Fair

Gainsborough 1950. Prod: Betty E. Box. Dir: Antony Darnborough and Terence Fisher. Scr: Muriel Box and Sydney Box. Ph: Reginald H. Wyer. Cast: Jean Simmons, Dirk Bogarde, David Tomlinson, Marcel Poncin, Cathleen Nesbitt. (Country of origin: United Kingdom)

Strange Affair of Uncle Harry, The

Univ 1945. Prod: Dir: Robert Siodmak. Scr: Thomas Joband Keith Winter. Ph: Paul Ivano. Cast: George Sanders, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Ella Raines, Sara Allgood, Moyna MacGill. (Country of origin: USA)

Student of Prague, The

Gotham (dba Alpha) 1913. Prod / Dir: Stellan Rye and Paul Wegener. Scr: Hanns Heinz Ewers, Henrik Galeen and Edgar Allan Poe. Ph: Guido Seeber. Cast: Paul Wegener, John Gottowt, Grete Berger, Lyda Salmonova, Lothar Korner. (Country of origin: Germany)

Tiger Bay

Pinewood 1959. Prod: John Hawkesworth. Dir: J. Lee Thompson. Scr: John Hawkesworth and Shelley Smith, from a Noel Calef novel. Ph: Eric Cross. Cast: John Mills, Horst Buchholz, Hayley Mills, Yvonne Mitchell, Megs Jenkins. (Country of origin: United kingdom)

Two Mrs Carrolls, The

WB 1947. Prod: Mark Hellinger and Jack L. Warner. Dir: Peter Godfrey. Scr: Thomas Job and Martin Vale. Ph: J. Peverell Marley. Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Barbara Stanwyck, Alexis Smith, Nigel Bruce, Ann Carter.

Waxworks

Neptun-Film Production 1924. Prod: Alexander Kwartiroff. Dir: Paul Leni. Scr: Henrik Galeen. Ph: Helmar Lerski. Cast: Emil Jannings, Conrad Veidt, Georg John, Werner Krauss, William Dieterle. (Country of origin: Germany)

Appendix II - The Motion Picture Production Code

General Principles

1. **No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it** [my highlight]. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

Particular Applications

I. Crimes Against the Law

These shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation. [my highlight]

1. Murder
 - a. The technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation.
 - b. Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail.
 - c. Revenge in modern times shall not be justified.
2. Methods of Crime should not be explicitly presented.
 - a. Theft, robbery, safe-cracking, and dynamiting of trains, mines, buildings, etc., should not be detailed in method.
 - b. Arson must subject to the same safeguards.
 - c. The use of firearms should be restricted to the essentials.
 - d. Methods of smuggling should not be presented.
3. Illegal drug traffic must never be presented.
4. The use of liquor in American life, when not required by the plot or for proper characterization, will not be shown.

II. Sex

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing. [my highlight]

1. Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.
2. **Scenes of Passion**
 - a. **They should not be introduced when not essential to the plot.**
 - b. **Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown.**

c. In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element. [*my highlight*]

3. Seduction or Rape

- a. They should never be more than suggested, and only when essential for the plot, and even then never shown by explicit method.
- b. They are never the proper subject for comedy.

4. Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden.

5. White slavery shall not be treated.

6. Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden.

7. Sex hygiene and venereal diseases are not subjects for motion pictures.

8. Scenes of actual child birth, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented.

9. Children's sex organs are never to be exposed.

III. Vulgarity

The treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil, subjects should always be subject to the dictates of good taste and a regard for the sensibilities of the audience.

IV. Obscenity

Obscenity in word, gesture, reference, song, joke, or by suggestion (even when likely to be understood only by part of the audience) is forbidden.

V. Profanity

Pointed profanity (this includes the words, God, Lord, Jesus, Christ - unless used reverently - Hell, S.O.B., damn, Gawd), or every other profane or vulgar expression however used, is forbidden.

VI. Costume

1. Complete nudity is never permitted. This includes nudity in fact or in silhouette, or any lecherous or licentious notice thereof by other characters in the picture.

2. Undressing scenes should be avoided, and never used save where essential to the plot.

3. Indecent or undue exposure is forbidden.

4. Dancing or costumes intended to permit undue exposure or indecent movements in the dance are forbidden.

VII. Dances

1. Dances suggesting or representing sexual actions or indecent passions are forbidden.

2. Dances which emphasize indecent movements are to be regarded as obscene.

VIII. Religion

1. No film or episode may throw ridicule on any religious faith.
2. Ministers of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains.
3. Ceremonies of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled.

IX. Locations

The treatment of bedrooms must be governed by good taste and delicacy.

X. National Feelings

1. The use of the Flag shall be consistently respectful.
2. The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly.

XI. Titles

Salacious, indecent, or obscene titles shall not be used.

XII. Repellent Subjects

The following subjects must be treated within the careful limits of good taste:

1. Actual hangings or electrocutions as legal punishments for crime.
2. Third degree methods.
3. Brutality and possible gruesomeness.
4. Branding of people or animals.
5. Apparent cruelty to children or animals.
6. The sale of women, or a woman selling her virtue.
7. Surgical operations.

Reasons Supporting the Preamble of the Code

I. Theatrical motion pictures, that is, pictures intended for the theatre as distinct from pictures intended for churches, schools, lecture halls, educational movements, social reform movements, etc., are primarily to be regarded as ENTERTAINMENT.

Mankind has always recognized the importance of entertainment and its value in rebuilding the bodies and souls of human beings.

But it has always recognized that entertainment can be a character either HELPFUL or HARMFUL to the human race, and in consequence has clearly distinguished between:

a. Entertainment which tends to improve the race, or at least to re-create and rebuild human beings exhausted with the realities of life; and

b. Entertainment which tends to degrade human beings, or to lower their standards of life and living.

Hence the MORAL IMPORTANCE of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. It enters intimately into the lives of men and women and affects them closely; it occupies their minds and affections during leisure hours; and ultimately touches the whole of their lives. A man may be judged by his standard of entertainment as easily as by the standard of his work.

So correct entertainment raises the whole standard of a nation.

Wrong entertainment lowers the whole living conditions and moral ideals of a race.

Note, for example, the healthy reactions to healthful sports, like baseball, golf; the unhealthy reactions to sports like cockfighting, bullfighting, bear baiting, etc.

Note, too, the effect on ancient nations of gladiatorial combats, the obscene plays of Roman times, etc.

II. Motion pictures are very important as ART.

Though a new art, possibly a combination art, it has the same object as the other arts, the presentation of human thought, emotion, and experience, in terms of an appeal to the soul through the senses.

Here, as in entertainment,

Art enters intimately into the lives of human beings.

Art can be morally good, lifting men to higher levels. This has been done through good music, great painting, authentic fiction, poetry, drama.

Art can be morally evil in its effects. This is the case clearly enough with unclean art, indecent books, suggestive drama. The effect on the lives of men and women are obvious.

Note: It has often been argued that art itself is unmoral, neither good nor bad. This is true of the THING which is music, painting, poetry, etc. But the THING is the PRODUCT of some person's mind, and the intention of that mind was either good or bad morally when it produced the thing. Besides, the thing has its EFFECT upon those who come into contact with it. In both these ways, that is, as a product of a mind and as the cause of definite effects, it has a deep moral significance and unmistakable moral quality.

Hence: The motion pictures, which are the most popular of modern arts for the masses, have their moral quality from the intention of the minds which produce them and from their effects on the moral lives and reactions of their audiences. This gives them a most important morality.

1. They reproduce the morality of the men who use the pictures as a medium for the expression of their ideas and ideals.

2. They affect the moral standards of those who, through the screen, take in these ideas and ideals.

In the case of motion pictures, the effect may be particularly emphasized because no art has so quick and so widespread an appeal to the masses. It has become in an incredibly short period the art of the multitudes.

III. The motion picture, because of its importance as entertainment and because of the trust placed in it by the peoples of the world, has special MORAL OBLIGATIONS:

A. Most arts appeal to the mature. This art appeals at once to every class, mature, immature, developed, undeveloped, law abiding, criminal. Music has its grades for different classes; so has literature and drama. This art of the motion picture, combining as it does the two fundamental appeals of looking at a picture and listening to a story, at once reaches every class of society.

B. By reason of the mobility of film and the ease of picture distribution, and because the possibility of duplicating positives in large quantities, this art reaches places unpenetrated by other forms of art.

C. Because of these two facts, it is difficult to produce films intended for only certain classes of people. The exhibitors' theatres are built for the masses, for the cultivated and the rude, the mature and the immature, the self-respecting and the criminal. Films, unlike books and music, can with difficulty be confined to certain selected groups.

D. The latitude given to film material cannot, in consequence, be as wide as the latitude given to book material. In addition:

a. A book describes; a film vividly presents. One presents on a cold page; the other by apparently living people.

b. A book reaches the mind through words merely; a film reaches the eyes and ears through the reproduction of actual events.

c. The reaction of a reader to a book depends largely on the keenness of the reader's imagination; the reaction to a film depends on the vividness of presentation.

Hence many things which might be described or suggested in a book could not possibly be presented in a film.

E. This is also true when comparing the film with the newspaper.

a. Newspapers present by description, films by actual presentation.

b. Newspapers are after the fact and present things as having taken place; the film gives the events in the process of enactment and with apparent reality of life.

F. Everything possible in a play is not possible in a film:

a. Because of the larger audience of the film, and its consequential mixed character. Psychologically, the larger the audience, the lower the moral mass resistance to suggestion.

b. Because through light, enlargement of character, presentation, scenic emphasis, etc., the screen story is brought closer to the audience than the play.

c. The enthusiasm for and interest in the film actors and actresses, developed beyond anything of the sort in history, makes the audience largely sympathetic toward the characters they portray and the stories in which they figure. Hence the audience is more ready to confuse actor and actress and the characters they portray, and it is most receptive of the emotions and ideals presented by the favorite stars.

G. Small communities, remote from sophistication and from the hardening process which often takes place in the ethical and moral standards of larger cities, are easily and readily reached by any sort of film.

H. The grandeur of mass settings, large action, spectacular features, etc., affects and arouses more intensely the emotional side of the audience.

In general, the mobility, popularity, accessibility, emotional appeal, vividness, straightforward presentation of fact in the film make for more intimate contact with a larger audience and for greater emotional appeal.

Hence the larger moral responsibilities of the motion pictures.

Reasons Underlying the General Principles

I. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.

This is done:

1. When evil is made to appear attractive and alluring, and good is made to appear unattractive.
2. When the sympathy of the audience is thrown on the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, sin. The same is true of a film that would throw sympathy against goodness, honor, innocence, purity or honesty.

Note: Sympathy with a person who sins is not the same as sympathy with the sin or crime of which he is guilty. We may feel sorry for the plight of the murderer or even understand the circumstances which led him to his crime: we may not feel sympathy with the wrong which he has done. The presentation of evil is often essential for art or fiction or drama. This in itself is not wrong provided:

a. That evil is not presented alluringly. Even if later in the film the evil is condemned or punished, it must not be allowed to appear so attractive that the audience's emotions are drawn to desire or approve so strongly that later the condemnation is forgotten and only the apparent joy of sin is remembered.

b. That throughout, the audience feels sure that evil is wrong and good is right.

II. Correct standards of life shall, as far as possible, be presented.

A wide knowledge of life and of living is made possible through the film. When right standards are consistently presented, the motion picture exercises the most powerful influences. It builds character, develops right ideals, inculcates correct principles, and all this in attractive story form. If motion pictures consistently hold up for admiration high types of characters and present stories that will affect lives for the better, they can become the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind.

III. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

By natural law is understood the law which is written in the hearts of all mankind, the greater underlying principles of right and justice dictated by conscience.

By human law is understood the law written by civilized nations.

1. The presentation of crimes against the law is often necessary for the carrying out of the plot. But the presentation must not throw sympathy with the crime as against the law nor with the criminal as against those who punish him.

2. The courts of the land should not be presented as unjust. This does not mean that a single court may not be presented as unjust, much less that a single court official must not be presented this way. But the court system of the country must not suffer as a result of this presentation.

Reasons Underlying the Particular Applications

I. Sin and evil enter into the story of human beings and hence in themselves are valid dramatic material.

II. In the use of this material, it must be distinguished between sin which repels by its very nature, and sins which often attract.

a. In the first class come murder, most theft, many legal crimes, lying, hypocrisy, cruelty, etc.

b. In the second class come sex sins, sins and crimes of apparent heroism, such as banditry, daring thefts, leadership in evil, organized crime, revenge, etc.

The first class needs less care in treatment, as sins and crimes of this class are naturally unattractive. The audience instinctively condemns all such and is repelled.

Hence the important objective must be to avoid the hardening of the audience, especially of those who are young and impressionable, to the thought and fact of crime. People can become accustomed even to murder, cruelty, brutality, and repellent crimes, if these are too frequently repeated.

The second class needs great care in handling, as the response of human nature to their appeal is obvious. This is treated more fully below.

III. A careful distinction can be made between films intended for general distribution, and films intended for use in theatres restricted to a limited audience. Themes and plots quite appropriate for the latter would be altogether out of place and dangerous in the former.

Note: The practice of using a general theatre and limiting its patronage to "Adults Only" is not completely satisfactory and is only partially effective.

However, maturer minds may easily understand and accept without harm subject matter in plots which do younger people positive harm.

Hence: If there should be created a special type of theatre, catering exclusively to an adult audience, for plays of this character (plays with problem themes, difficult discussions and maturer treatment) it would seem to afford an outlet, which does not now exist, for pictures unsuitable for general distribution but permissible for exhibitions to a restricted audience.

I. Crimes Against the Law

The treatment of crimes against the law must not:

1. Teach methods of crime.
2. Inspire potential criminals with a desire for imitation.

3. Make criminals seem heroic and justified. [*my highlight*]

Revenge in modern times shall not be justified. In lands and ages of less developed civilization and moral principles, revenge may sometimes be presented. This would be the case especially in places where no law exists to cover the crime because of which revenge is committed.

Because of its evil consequences, the drug traffic should not be presented in any form. The existence of the trade should not be brought to the attention of audiences.

The use of liquor should never be excessively presented. In scenes from American life, the necessities of plot and proper characterization alone justify its use. And in this case, it should be shown with moderation.

II. Sex

Out of a regard for the sanctity of marriage and the home, the triangle, that is, the love of a third party for one already married, needs careful handling. The treatment should not throw sympathy against marriage as an institution.

Scenes of passion must be treated with an honest acknowledgement of human nature and its normal reactions [*my highlight*]. Many scenes cannot be presented without arousing dangerous emotions on the part of the immature, the young or the criminal classes.

Even within the limits of pure love, certain facts have been universally regarded by lawmakers as outside the limits of safe presentation.

In the case of impure love, the love which society has always regarded as wrong and which has been banned by divine law, the following are important:

1. Impure love must not be presented as attractive and beautiful.
2. It must not be the subject of comedy or farce, or treated as material for laughter.
3. It must not be presented in such a way to arouse passion or morbid curiosity on the part of the audience.
4. It must not be made to seem right and permissible.
5. It general, it must not be detailed in method and manner.

III. Vulgarity; IV. Obscenity; V. Profanity; hardly need further explanation than is contained in the Code.

VI. Costume

General Principles:

1. The effect of nudity or semi-nudity upon the normal man or woman, and much more upon the young and upon immature persons, has been honestly recognized by all lawmakers and moralists.
2. Hence the fact that the nude or semi-nude body may be beautiful does not make its use in the films moral. For, in addition to its beauty, the effect of the nude or semi-nude body on the normal individual must be taken into consideration.
3. Nudity or semi-nudity used simply to put a "punch" into a picture comes under the head of immoral actions. It is immoral in its effect on the average audience.
4. Nudity can never be permitted as being necessary for the plot. Semi-nudity must not result in undue or indecent exposures.
5. Transparent or translucent materials and silhouette are frequently more suggestive than actual exposure.

VII. Dances

Dancing in general is recognized as an art and as a beautiful form of expressing human emotions. But dances which suggest or represent sexual actions, whether performed solo or with two or more; dances intended to excite the emotional reaction of an audience; dances with movement of the breasts, excessive body movements while the feet are stationary, violate decency and are wrong.

VIII. Religion

The reason why ministers of religion may not be comic characters or villains is simply because the attitude taken toward them may easily become the attitude taken toward religion in general. Religion is lowered in the minds of the audience because of the lowering of the audience's respect for a minister.

IX. Locations

Certain places are so closely and thoroughly associated with sexual life or with sexual sin that their use must be carefully limited.

X. National Feelings

The just rights, history, and feelings of any nation are entitled to most careful consideration and respectful treatment.

XI. Titles

As the title of a picture is the brand on that particular type of goods, it must conform to the ethical practices of all such honest business.

XII. Repellent Subjects

Such subjects are occasionally necessary for the plot. Their treatment must never offend good taste nor injure the sensibilities of an audience.

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